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Honobu Yonezawa
愚者のエンドロール
Why didn't she ask EBA?
角川文庫

Hyouka Volume 2

The Credit Roll of the Fool / Why didn't She Ask EBA?

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0 - Avant Title

Log No. 100205

Anonymous: are you sure you're alright?
Mayuko: i'm sorry
Anonymous: everyone would blame you, are you sure you're alright with that?
Mayuko: i'll apologize to them
Mayuko: i have no other choice
Anonymous: apologizing is not the problem here
Anonymous: you'll still be blamed
Anonymous: they'll say that the problem still hasn't been resolved
Mayuko: i know
Mayuko: but I'm out of ideas already
Mayuko: i
Mayuko: i'm sorry
Anonymous: ok, I understand
Anonymous: it's indeed true that there was no suitable material to begin with
Anonymous: so good job for lasting till now
Mayuko: sorry
Anonymous: there's no need to apologize
Anonymous: i'll take care of the rest
Mayuko: you're doing this?
Anonymous: i'd start from scratch if it were me
Anonymous: i can't do this, but I'll think of something
Mayuko: ?

Anonymous: but it'll probably not be as good
Anonymous: as you would expect

Log No. 100209

A.ta.shi♪: sorry~
Anonymous: don't be
Anonymous: we had no choice since things turned out this way
A.ta.shi♪: since a cute lower classman has asked me to help, I've gotta do something
A.ta.shi♪: you went through all this trouble after all...
A.ta.shi♪: but as I'm so far away, I probably won't make it in time
Anonymous: umm
Anonymous: then is there anyone else you could suggest?
Anonymous: anyone that could do this
A.ta.shi♪: suggest huh?
A.ta.shi♪: hmm
A.ta.shi♪: ...
Anonymous: senpai?
A.ta.shi♪: ZZZ...
Anonymous: senpai
A.ta.shi♪: kidding
A.ta.shi♪: i wouldn't say he could do this, but you could make him do errands for you
A.ta.shi♪: you could even make him dance

Log No. 100214

Anonymous: how about it?
L: Yes, I'll definitely come!
L: No question about it.
Anonymous: glad to hear that
Anonymous: i'll let you know the time and location afterwards
L: Lookinf forward to it
L: Looling
L: Looking
Anonymous: you might not know this
Anonymous: but if you just type the first few letters and wait for a bit
Anonymous: it'll suggest the correct word for you
L: Reallu?
L: Really?
L: Ah, I see.
Anonymous: anyway, I'm counting on you
Anonymous: btw
L: Yes?
Anonymous: you can invite your friends. Those 3 would do
L: Is that okay with you?
Anonymous: they're with the Classics Club, right?
Anonymous: i'd be glad if you could bring your club members along

1 - Let's Watch a Movie Preview!

There was a saying that all men are created equal. At the same time, it was also said that nobody is born perfect. If both of these phrases were valid, then the order of heaven would be unenforceable. As a person's value would change depending on the region they're from, one cannot just dismiss their values entirely. Let alone being born perfect, just being born with one talent is difficult enough. While the common folk may be envious or jealous of geniuses around them, for me their talents are just a part of our daily lives, so I don't see what the fuss is all about.

It was the end of the summer vacation. I was having such a conversation with my old mate Fukube Satoshi, who nodded in agreement with my thoughts.

"Exactly. For the past 15 years of my life, I haven't seemed to be the sort to possess any talents at all. There's a saying that great talents mature late, but that sounds more like working hard through nurture rather than talent. So I guess wishing for some talents is a distant dream for us."

"Well, geniuses are geniuses for a reason. If we common folk could obtain their talents, then we wouldn't need to be envious of them."

"My, longing for the life of common folk now, aren't you, Houtarou? ... If it's you, then..."

Satoshi then casually quipped, "I think you're actually quite talented."

I had no idea what he was talking about. As I gave a puzzled look, Satoshi chuckled and said, "I know very well that I'm not the talented sort, but the same cannot be said about you, Houtarou."

"Wha?"

As his manner of speaking was usually filled with jokes, I thought a little about accepting the good parts of what he just said at face value. I had two rebuttals to make, firstly, "If I had to say it, I think it's premature of you to call yourself a normal person. Aren't you pretty good at collecting vast amounts of knowledge?"

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I guess, even if it sounds like bragging. Though I wouldn't go so far and say that I'm good enough at winning quiz shows. The knowledge I learned isn't that vast."

Really?

Anyway, second rebuttal, "If I wasn't not a normal person, then there's no way I could observe people."

"Then I won't say anything more. Though I still have reservations about you not having any talents."

"Where have you ever seen me using my talents anyway?"

"Hmm, where, huh?"

After pretending to think, he pointed his finger towards Kamiyama High School.

"There."

"The school?"

"No, the Geology Room, AKA the Classics Club room... You were simply amazing in solving the 'Hyouka' incident. Truth be told, I never expected you to be that good. That's why I said I'm having reservations about you not being talented based on that," He said while smiling. In contrast, I looked bitter.

The "Hyouka" incident. It was not a criminal incident, neither was it civil. "Hyouka" was the name of a series of essay anthologies published by the Classics Club, a mysterious organization which Satoshi and I belonged to. The reason why the anthologies were named as such cannot be explained in a few sentences, and for very good reason as well. Thanks to such a reason, I was involved in all sorts of bothersome events. And Satoshi was commenting on my role in such events.

He continued, "The one who solved all that was you."

"Now you're exaggerating. I was just lucky."

"Lucky, huh? I wasn't talking about how you think of yourself, but how I see you."

He can say such haughty stuff with such a calm tone. As I was used to his manner of speaking, I was hardly annoyed.

Besides being an old mate, Fukube Satoshi is also a good rival. As a guy he was short in stature, and his weak-looking appearance could easily be mistaken for that of a girl if seen from afar. However, he is actually quite spirited, especially when pursuing things that interest him. So much so that he would prioritize that over other things that are considered "necessary" by everyone else. He is always seen carrying a smile and a drawstring bag. As he swung the drawstring bag around, he asked, "By the way, what time is it now?"

"Check your own watch."

"It's inside my bag, it's too bothersome to take it out," he tapped at his bag and said. Satoshi considered carrying a wristwatch around too troublesome, and would prefer to check the time via his cellphone.

"I'm the one that's feeling bothersome here."

"'If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, hurry up and finish it.' Right?"

Satoshi smiled while poking fun at my motto. I checked the time on my wristwatch and corrected him, "It's 'If I have to do it, make it quick.' ... Anyway, it's just past ten."

"Do you really have to memorize every word of that? It's not like it's some grandiose motto or anything. Wow, is it ten already? We'd better hurry. Chitanda-san may be able to forgive us for being late, but it's Mayaka I'm scared of."

I agree with that. Ibara Mayaka can be very scary when she's angry. I don't know if Satoshi knows this or not, but I have a feeling that Chitanda Eru's the same as well. As Satoshi picked up his speed, I followed suit.

Crossing the crosswalk, we came upon the school gates. It was a typical day in Kamiyama High, where there are students everywhere despite it being a school holiday.

The courtyard was filled with students either in uniform or casual wear. The music from the musical clubs could be heard playing. Besides the courtyard some sort of large monument was being erected, probably some attraction devised by some club. Even though it was summer vacation, Kamiyama High School was still filled with students full of energy, as everyone was preparing for the Cultural Festival.

The total number of students attending Kamiyama High School numbered about a thousand. The school provided curriculum for university entrance exams as well as having a lively club activity scene. If you excluded the exalting Cultural Festival, Kamiyama High was just a

normal school like any other. The campus contained three buildings; the General Block which houses the regular classrooms, the Special Block with their special purposes classrooms, and the Gymnasium. The Classics Club room was located in the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block.

Amidst the singing of the Chorus Club and A Capella Club from the courtyard, we hastened our pace. As Satoshi said, my motto was "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick." To put it simply, I was an "energy saver". Such a lifestyle was totally different to those that go all out in these student activities like the Cultural Festival. Though I wasn't in the mood to think about such things now.

From the entrance, we headed towards the corridor leading to the Special Block. A long painting from some club could be seen placed on the side of the staircase to dry as we climbed them, taking four steps at a time, which was quite exhausting. As it was late summer, I took out my handkerchief to wipe my sweat as we entered the Geology Room.

We were at once greeted by someone yelling, "You're late!"

Standing firmly in the centre of the room like a guardian god was none other than Ibara, the actual person in charge of overseeing the publication of the Classics Club anthology "Hyouka", with whom I have a long acquaintance.

Ibara Mayaka. While we were not exactly intimate with each other, for some reason we just couldn't avoid seeing each other all the time. While she had grown since primary school, she still had a childish-looking face despite being a high school student. Despite her appearance, she was actually quite strict. Besides being unforgiving to mistakes made by others, she was even more demanding towards herself. The reason for her wrath was simple, as it was agreed that we were supposed to meet up here at ten in the morning.

Maintaining her guardian god stance, Ibara spoke, "Fuku-chan, explain yourself."

Satoshi's smile became stiff as he said, "Well, we couldn't use our bikes today..."

"You should have known that already!"

By the way, while people were free to come to Kamiyama High School via bicycle during summer vacation, as the bicycle park was currently under maintenance, it was unusable.

"Get a grip already, Fuku-chan! You still haven't handed in your manuscripts!"

Satoshi spread out his hands as he struggled to protest, "W, wait a minute Mayaka! Isn't Houtarou late as well?"

Ibara turned to look at me, and upon meeting my gaze, turned back towards Satoshi.

"Who cares about Oreki?"

... Double standards, huh?

The reason Ibara paid so much attention to Satoshi was because she had a crush on him. And she herself made no attempts to hide this. On the other hand, Satoshi had been evading her advances to this day. As to when they started all this, I had no idea.

Anyway, the Classics Club was made up of four members: myself, Satoshi, and Ibara, as well as the President, Chitanda Eru. Though right now Chitanda was nowhere to be seen.

"That's double standards!"

"What're you talking about? There's no double standards."

I interrupted their meaningless exchange and said, "Hey, Ibara, Chitanda's absent as well."

"How can I have double standards... Huh? Chi-chan? That's right, she still hasn't arrived. That worries me."

"I see, indeed it's not double standards," Satoshi muttered.

"Yeah, it's triple standards."

Unusually, Ibara replied while smiling.

As if on cue, a silhouette was seen silently opening the door and entering the room. It was Chitanda.

Chitanda Eru. With her long, dark hair and frail-looking figure, she gave the look of an elegant lady. And that was a fact, as she was the daughter of the Chitanda Clan, which owned vast tracts of farmland within a corner of Kamiyama City. However, in contrast to her graceful nature were her large eyes. To me, those were what represented her the most. If Ibara was a child in appearance, then Chitanda was a child due to her incredible curiosity to every mystery she ever encountered. Yet she was intelligent despite such a childlike nature, which made it all the more difficult to cope with her.

The clock pointed to half past ten. Chitanda bowed deeply and said, "I'm very sorry for being late."

Chitanda hardly ever looked this unkempt. While not strictly punctual, it was rare to see her late. Ibara must have been thinking the same thing as she asked Chitanda without blaming her, "Did something happen?"

"Yes. A little bit. I was having a long conversation just now."

What conversation? We won't know if you don't elaborate. That said, Chitanda continued before I could ask.

"I'll explain later about what conversation I was having."

What's she up to? I have a bad feeling about this.

"Hmm... Oh well, let's get started then."

The reason the Classics Club was gathered here today was to hold a meeting concerning the publication of the club anthology "Hyouka", which included what design and fonts to use, how to arrange the articles and what paper to print on. While it would have been better if I had just suggested to let Ibara handle everything, she probably wouldn't allow it, as she reasoned that since we have all contributed our money and manuscripts, it's only fair that we take part in compiling the anthology as well. I didn't exactly want to do this, but then I don't have anything better to do during summer vacation anyway.

Ibara took out a few paper samples from her bag and began speaking.

"This is the highest quality paper that our budget could allow, while this is the cheapest. They're very different, and not just in appearance, but how the ink appears on them..."

As she began explaining, both Satoshi and Chitanda listened with enthusiasm. While I felt like a piece of rotting wood on the mountain, I still made an effort to listen, so that Ibara wouldn't get mad.

TL Note: Oreki seems to be referring to the idiom "枯れ木も山の賑わい" which means “even the dead trees contribute to the mountain’s prosperity”. It carries the meaning "even things that seem useless have their uses" and also "something seems useless only because we don't know what its use is". Oreki is probably comparing himself to the tree from this idiom, saying that he is useless, or that he doesn't know what his use is in this situation.

The editorial meeting was over sooner than expected, just under an hour after it began. Ibara had written down the items which had been approved in her note, which she would then relay to the publishers. Being an editing supervisor sure sounds tough, so I placed my palms together in gratitude of her hard work.

It was now afternoon. While we were free to go home, we decided to stay and have lunch, having just bought some boxed lunches from the convenience store. As I took my boxed lunch worth less than 400yen out of my shoulder bag, the other three followed suit.

As he peeled the film wrapping around his rice ball, Satoshi spoke without addressing anyone specifically.

"So, when's the anthology gonna be published?"

The one who should have an idea as to how to answer that question was of course Ibara, who grumbled as though saying "As if I could remember exactly when" and said, "We should have the sample copy by early October, but we won't be getting the actual copies until just before the Cultural Festival."

It was now late August, a week to go before summer vacation ends. It would become bothersome to continue writing when classes resumed in September. As an energy saver, I do not like to leave work undone as it's inefficient. It is of course better to get it finished as soon as possible. Anyway, we've still got plenty of time.

The sound of Chitanda opening the lid of her boxed lunch could be heard. For girls her age, boxed lunches would usually be small and contain food as simple as small snacks. Though her box was just as small, the food it contained looked quite filling: Stewed butterbur, sweet omelettes and minced meat. Before taking out her chopsticks, she asked nonchalantly, "By the way, are any of you tied up this afternoon?"

As I was never the sort with anything better to do anyway, I do have time to kill. Naturally, I shook my head. So too did Ibara.

"I've got to take these notes to the publisher, but it won't be until this evening."

Satoshi thought for a while,

"I was thinking of heading to the Handicraft Club to see if I could help out. I haven't gotten my hands on sewing equipment for some time now. Besides, it's been a while since I hung out with the Student Council committee. But why not?"

As all three of us were in agreement, Chitanda looked as though she was the happiest person alive. Seeing her smile, I suddenly had a bad feeling. Though I wouldn't go so far say this was based on experience, I was just apprehensive of trouble, that's all.

As she placed her chopsticks down, she said with vigour, "Then, let's watch a preview!"

Preview?

I had no idea what she was talking about. Did something happen which I have no knowledge of? Without thinking, I turned to look at Satoshi, who simply shook his head to indicate he too knew nothing. Ditto for Ibara, who looked puzzled.

"Chi-chan, what preview are you talking about? A movie?"

"Yes... Umm, it's not really a movie, but more like a videotaped movie."

Videotaped movie? Surely she means home-made movie.

"Is it with the Movie Studies Club?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"Not really."

"Then, the Home Movie Studies Club?"

Stop being stupid, Satoshi. Both Ibara and I stared coldly at his smiling face, though he continued smiling as usual and said, "I'm sure it exists! If there exists a Classics Club, surely a Home Movie Studies Club would exist as well."

Satoshi dispelled his joke right away, true to his motto of "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away." If he says it exists, then it probably does exist. This was not something to be surprised about, as Kamiyama High School does have a huge variety of arts-based clubs out there.

But still Chitanda shook her head.

"It's not that either. It's an exhibition movie made by Class 2-F."

"Wow, a class exhibition."

Ibara nodded in admiration.

"Don't think my class would have the energy to organize their own exhibition, as everyone is busy with their own clubs."

Indeed. Even for my class 1-B, no one made any proposals to organize something for the Cultural Festival in the class's name, as everyone was tired out by their own club activities. Besides, holding an exhibition would be quite a huge task. Come to think of it, this would make Satoshi pretty amazing, as he's busy with the Classics Club, Handicraft Club, and Student Council.

"Some Class 2-F students belonging to various sports teams decided they too want to take part in the Cultural Festival. As I know someone

from Class 2-F, I was invited to their movie preview in order to ask for my opinion of it. How about it? Are you interested?"

"Yeah, I'll come!"

Satoshi agreed without even batting an eyelid. Then again, anything that interests him would elicit such a reaction.

Ibara raised her brows slightly and asked, "What kind of movie is it?"

"Umm, I hear it's a mystery movie."

That answer was enough to satisfy Ibara.

"Sounds entertaining. Sure, I'll come as well."

"I thought you hated artistic movies, Mayaka,"

"I don't dislike them... This one's made by people with an interest in movies, after all."

Indeed, no one would think along the lines of wanting to watch a movie made by people who just "want to take part in the Cultural Festival".

Now, what about me?

To be honest, I'm not exactly that interested in movies. I've never felt like watching any movie, whether it was arthouse movies or blockbuster movies. As to why that is, I'm not too sure myself. Probably something to do with watching movies being too time-consuming, I was told that I'm missing half the fun of my life as a result. I don't exactly hate watching them, and there were some movies which I was fond of...

Anyway, guess I'll go home.

Before I could speak, Chitanda cheerfully opened her mouth.

"Then it's decided! We're all going then!"

"No, I..."

"Actually, besides myself, I was told to bring three more people along with me. I was thinking that there are three of you here in the Classics Club; the number is just right."

She's not even listening.

Smiling mischievously, Satoshi pointed his thumb at me and said, "Chitanda-san, Houtarou seems to have something to say."

"Oreki-san, you're coming, right?"

Ugh.

"... Aren't you?"

Argh.

Why was it that I could never figure out how to handle Chitanda every time? No matter what kind of responses I thought up beforehand, she was bound to make me go. Of course I could have chosen to just turn her down without feeling guilty, but the problem was I could find no reason to refuse her.

I shrugged my shoulders in resignation. Whatever, there was nothing for me to do even if I went home now anyway.

The Audio/Visual Room had its curtains drawn, blocking out the light of the setting sun from outside, turning the room dark.

From within that darkness a female student emerged suddenly. The reason for such an illusion probably had something to do with the navy blue dress she was wearing, which blended well with the darkness.

Chitanda called out to her.

"I've come as you requested me to."

She walked towards us, and it was only then I could make out her features.

Her height was similar to Chitanda's, perhaps a bit taller, while her figure was slim. Her eyes were slightly raised and small, and her face looked refined. It wouldn't be too far off to describe her as pretty, though to me she felt more stern than pretty. While it was hard to determine whether she was a year older than us, there was a sense of majestic solemnity exuding from her. Rather than a high school student, she felt more like a stereotypical police officer or teacher... no, more like a female Self Defense Force officer, with a rank no lower than Major. Speaking in a calmingly soft voice, she said, "Ah, so you've come."

She looked at each one of us and continued, "Welcome. You have my thanks for taking the time to come."

Chitanda slowly introduced us one by one.

"This is Ibara Mayaka-san, Fukube Satoshi-san and Oreki Houtarou-san. Like me, they're all members of the Classics Club."

The girl seemed to give a rather ambiguous expression as we were being introduced. I couldn't tell if she was smiling or looking depressed. But she soon reverted to her previous expression and bowed to us.

"Pleased to meet you... My name is Irisu Fuyumi."

As she introduced herself, Satoshi reacted at once and raised his voice in exaltation.

"Ah, just as I thought, you're Irisu-sempai! I knew I'd seen you somewhere before."

"Your name is Fukube Satoshi-kun, right? I'm sorry, but have we met before?"

"You attended the meeting for the Cultural Festival Organizing Committee during the end of June, right?"

"I can't quite remember, did something happen?"

Regardless of whether she really forgot or was playing dumb, Irisu answered as such. Satoshi continued cheerfully, "I saw the way you resolved the conflict between the musical clubs and the drama clubs. Truth be told, I was amazed! Since then I've always wanted to meet with you at least once!"

"Ah, now I remember," she replied bluntly, "I didn't do anything particularly special then."

"No, really, you were great. I still remember it now; three times you urged the chairperson to duly restore order at once so members could voice their opinions without interruptions. The conflict was sorted out in less than five minutes as a result. I virtually gave a standing ovation in the bottom of my heart, as Irisu-sempai felt more like the chairperson back then."

If Ibara was not the sort to give compliments, then it was also rare for Satoshi to give praise to someone in such an over the top way. Now here's the interesting part, how would Irisu Fuyumi react to such a compliment? I listened intently as I wondered.

Yet despite Satoshi's gaze of admiration, she hardly reacted much and said, "Is that so?"

"Irisu-san, you did say you weren't that interested in what happens around school, right?" Chitanda asked, to which Irisu nodded.

"Fukube-kun was part of the Committee on my behalf as club president, so that meeting probably did happen. So please don't be too startled by his words."

"I see. I wasn't really startled though."

Satoshi looked dejected as she said that. Ibara then asked Chitanda, "Chi-chan, how are you acquainted with her?"

"Irisu-san? ...Our families are quite close to each other. Irisu-san would often look after me when I was younger."

So the Chitanda Clan does have people to hang out with as childhood friends, that sure is some luxury the Oreki Clan couldn't afford. They sure are a prominent clan. Come to think of it, was Irisu's clan also just as famous? I'm not quite sure myself. Anyway, it probably doesn't concern Irisu Fuyumi herself.

"Anyway,"

Irisu returned to the subject at hand, and showed us the object she was holding in her hand. The rectangular object seemed to be a video cassette.

"You have been invited today to watch this tape. As I'm sure you've heard from Chitanda already, this video is a movie made by my class. My wish is for you to watch the movie and give us your honest feedback."

"We look forward to doing so."

So said Chitanda.

Seemed like a real movie preview, alright. But what for? As the question popped in my head, I asked, "Is that all we have to do?"

Irisu looked straight at me with her grim gaze. Feeling the pressure from her gaze, I continued, "Just watch, and then provide feedback?"

"Is that so strange?"

"Even if we really do give our critique, you're not going to amend the movie, are you? Surely a preview is mainly for the purpose of advertisement, where you ask people to spread the word about your movie, isn't it?"

For some reason, Irisu nodded as though satisfied.

"A good question. Indeed, there's no point in just watching this movie. I will answer your question, but it would be better if you could first watch the movie. Shall we?"

Hmm, something didn't feel right. But due to her efficient answer, I said no more.

Upon seeing my agreement, Irisu continued, "We have yet to give this movie a name. For now it simply goes by the working title 'Mystery'. When the video ends, there's something we would like to ask of you, for that purpose, we wish for you to watch it first."

This time it was Ibara's turn to speak.

"If it's called 'Mystery', then is it a detective movie?"

"It wouldn't be wrong to call it that."

"Then may we take memos during the movie?"

"Of course. Do write as many details as you see."

That said, we left all our stuff in the Geology Room. As Ibara was about to ask if we could go back to get our bags, Satoshi spoke.

"I'll do the memo taking then."

And duly took out a notebook from the drawstring bag that he always carries along... I didn't know he'd brought that inside as well.

Irisu looked at her simply designed silver wrist watch and said, "Now, let us start. Please take a seat."

As suggested, we took the seats nearest to us. Satoshi opened his notebook while Irisu headed towards the control room. Before entering the iron door, she turned to us and said, "Enjoy the movie."

As she closed the door, a mechanical sound could be heard. A white screen slowly descended before us. We duly sat upright and leaned as far back as possible.

By the way, Irisu sure didn't prepare enough for this preview. She should at least have provided us with some popcorn.

A movie whose title had not yet even been decided should normally not exist. Yet an image appeared before us. It was none other than Kamiyama High School, which we were all used to seeing. It showed a classroom with tables and chairs lined up tidily. A look outside the window showed that the time was during sunset.

A narrator began to speak in a husky male voice.

"It all began when a group of determined students from Class 2-F decided to participate in the Kanya Festival in order to leave behind memories of their high school life. So they held a meeting one day after school to decide what to do."

By the way, "Kanya Festival" is the nickname for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, though we in the Classics Club do not call it as such. As for the reason, that's another long story.

A group of students then appeared on the screen. Six of them in total, seated around tables arranged facing each other. This must be the meeting scene that the narrator just mentioned. The camera then showed each person while the narrator introduced them with their names.

First off was "Kaitou Takeo", a muscular male student who looked as though he belonged to some martial arts team. Sporting a crew cut, he was the tallest of the six students.

Second was "Sugimura Jirou", a slim looking student and the only bespectacled male student. Perhaps due to having the camera pointed at him, he couldn't remain steady.

Third was "Yamanishi Midori", a girl with tanned skin and dyed brown hair going down to her shoulder. Though a few seconds elapsed between various shots of her, her hair seemed to have grown a bit already.

Next was "Senoue Mamiko", a short girl with a slightly wide girth. Rather than plump, it might have something more to do with her round face instead.

Following her was "Katsuda Takeo", a guy with rather good looks. Though his hair was dyed reddish, he felt like more of the serious sort of student.

Finally, "Kounosu Yuri", a plain-dressed girl who looked quite relaxed despite having the camera facing her. She was the shortest of all the girls.

As their names were being introduced, Satoshi quickly scribbled them down in his notebook. Most of the name spellings were guessed as they weren't written on the screen.

After the introductions, the next scene showed the bespectacled Sugimura speak.

"How about we visit the Narakubo area?"

Ugh Ibara could be heard groaning. I knew how she felt, since the guy was reading his lines in a deadpan manner.

"The Narakubo area?" asked Yamanishi, whose hair length varied depending on the scene. The red-headed Katsuda replied, *"I think I've heard of that area, it's in Furuoka Town, if I remember correctly."*

"Exactly, it's an abandoned mining village. It was born during the mining boom, though there's hardly anyone there now."

It was deadpan dialogue all the way, but that was to be expected. Chitanda did say these were people from sports teams who wanted to take part in the Cultural Festival, after all. Can't really expect them to perform like the Drama Club.

The well-built Kaitou raised his arm to speak.

"Research in an abandoned village, huh? Sounds good to me."

"It would be good to go there once, as it does have an appeal that makes it worth visiting. A village with a history worth one's lifetime, that sounds interesting."

Yamanishi's line here was slightly better as she imbued it with some emotion. It's probably her genuine feeling about the place. Meanwhile, the round faced Senouchi responded with an equally good performance, *"The material may sound interesting, but it's an abandoned ruin, isn't it? Not exactly my type of place."*

Kounosu, who wore a downcast look all this time, interjected, *"I know how to get to Narakubo... It's deep within the mountains. If we walk from the nearest bus stop, we'll get there in about an hour."*

"Eh~"

Yamanishi didn't sound too pleased. She's probably the character that complains a lot. On the other hand, Kaitou looked rather relaxed.

"We should be able to handle it if it's just an hour. We could ride bikes there, and even have a picnic while we're there."

"Then it's decided. Our exhibition for the Cultural Festival will be a research into the history of the Narakubo area."

Sugimura then gave a dissenting opinion, citing that just covering an abandoned village isn't interesting enough. He was backed by Yamanishi, who preferred to go somewhere else. Senoue suggested it could be fixed by presenting the story from an interesting perspective. When asked how it could be done, Sugimura suggested covering it like an adventure story, but was rejected for being too traditional. Kounosu then suggested covering the occultish aspect of the area, which was approved for being interesting. Though Sugimura countered that more research would be

needed as there were hardly any ghost stories from that area. What followed was an awkward series of give and take between the classmates as they debated heatedly amongst themselves on which ideas to adopt and which to reject. That was the main flow of this initial scene. As the scene blacked out, the narrator spoke again.

"A week later, the group headed towards the Narakubo area in Furuoka Town."

As the screen faded back in, the school scenery was replaced by that of a mountainous forest amidst the midsummer heat. This was no doubt the Narakubo area.

I knew where Furuoka Town was. It's about 20 kilometers north of Kamiyama City. It was once a prosperous town due to a rich deposit of lead or some other metal in the mines nearby, but like any other town that solely relies on one industry to prosper, it has since fallen into hard times once the mine was exhausted. But what of the Narakubo area?

That was the topic Ibara and Satoshi were discussing.

"Fuku-chan, you heard of Narakubo?"

Unsurprisingly, Satoshi of course knew.

"Yup, it used to be the main mining area for the Furuoka Mines. While getting there is inconvenient, at its height it was pretty prosperous."

He then went on to list a few famous enka singers.

"... These were the sort of celebrities that they managed to invite to perform in the area."

Ibara looked a little surprised. So did I, for the names Satoshi listed were quite prominent.

"However,"

As Satoshi was about to continue, Chitanda cut him short.

"It's about to start."

As the picture moved along the dense forest, it showed a group of students. Naturally they were in their appropriate casual wear for such hot weather. Each carried their own rucksack, though we had no idea what was inside of them.

Yamanishi stood upright and said, *"Sure is hot. We've been walking for some time, are we there yet?"*

Sugimura replied, *"Almost. About five minutes, I guess."*

"That's what you said a while ago. Darn, it's so hot, I'm tired already."

"Well, you're not the only one who's hot, so hurry up and keep walking."

So said Kaitou. And they all began to walk again, with the camera following them.

The Narakubo area indeed looked like it was situated deep within the mountains. While there were signs of human activity along the road, they were largely covered up by the forest. Amidst the bushes one could occasionally catch a glimpse of the streets of Furuoka Town below the mountains. While the road was paved, one could see signs of damage. The asphalt on the pedestrian sidewalk looked as if it was about to come off in pieces the size of fists. Whether it was due to such poor walking conditions, the camera constantly shook as it moved along. If the actors were amateurs, then so was the cameraman. Even a layperson like me

could tell the camera work looked unusual, resulting in a hard to see visual.

The shot then cut to another angle from behind the group. Before long, Sugimura, who led the group, straightened his glasses and pointed ahead.

"We're here. That's Narakubo!"

Everyone followed Sugimura's gaze, including the camera, and a basin within the mountain was shown. On top of the basin was a ruin.

For someone living in a modern city, to think that such a ruin could exist 20 kilometers from where I lived felt surreal. There were many single houses scattered with broken windows and roofs in disrepair. Some were virtually collapsed. If this place was the ore mine, then these houses would be the miners' houses. Disregarding any signs of human presence, these houses were now surrounded by a thick layer of ivy. An enamel signboard could be seen under what used to be a shophouse, further emphasizing the loneliness of the deserted townscape. I see, Sugimura's words weren't made up, this place was indeed worth visiting.

The camera panned quickly across such scenes. Maybe it had something to do with the cameraman's inexperience, or perhaps it was done to conceal the actors' crappy performances. At any rate, the next visual shown was quite intense.

Even the actors looked stunned by the scenery. As the camera faced towards what they were seeing, someone could be heard whispering *"Wow"*. I had a feeling that line wasn't scripted.

But then, the scripted dialogue resumed once again.

"I see. This is a good place to collect material," Said Katsuda, who took out an instant camera from his pocket and began snapping away.

Senoue took a notebook out and began writing. After a brief pause, Kaitou began instructing in a loud voice, *"Anyway, we need to find a place to stay for the night. We'll start with the research after that."*

"How about there then?"

Kounosu pointed to one of the ruins in Narakubo. As the camera moved to where she was pointing, a large building could be seen, seemingly a theatre.

"We should be safe from the rain if it's there."

"I see. Then let's go."

The six of them then began to walk down the slope, and the scene faded out.

Upon fading in, the screen now showed the entrance of the theatre. The group stood before its two glass doors and looked up at the building. The camera panned up towards its dirty walls. Looking diagonally upwards, the theatre felt surreal.

The camera then returned to the group, where Kaitou opened the glass door, and each of them followed him into the theatre. The last one to enter was Kounosu, with her eyes looking down. She muttered, *"For some reason, I have a bad feeling about this."*

She then entered the theatre, and as the six of them entered the darkness within, the scene ended.

Both Satoshi and Ibara raised their voices unexpectedly. Satoshi looked delighted, while Ibara looked displeased.

"Aha, a mansion mystery, huh?"

"Hmph, just a mansion mystery?"

The next scene resumed within the mansion... sorry, I mean theatre. As there would be no electricity in an abandoned village, it was dark inside the building. Compared to the silhouettes of the buildings outside, which could be clearly seen under the summer sunlight, the visual inside was difficult to see, though not bad enough to not be able to make out the actors' faces. The flooring was made of stone, as their footsteps could be heard knocking on it as they walked.

"It's full of dust...," Yamanishi muttered as she swept the dust off her clothes and fiddled her hair. The blurry visuals probably had something to do with it actually being dusty. Walking beside her, Katsuda looked up and said, *"Seems like the building's still sturdy enough."*

Senouchi, still holding the notebook in her hand, turned and asked Sugimura, *"They've got quite the theatre built in these mountains, haven't they?"*

"The ore mine was profitable, after all. In the past anyway. And it's exactly because the mine is so deep in the mountains that they decided to build something like this to entertain themselves."

"Ah...," whispered Satoshi, who had an interest in such trivia, and said to me, "Now they're saying something interesting."

It's not as if we were expecting some interesting dialogue to begin with anyway.

Kaitou then stamped his foot, creating a loud noise that echoed across the hall. As I wondered what was going on, the camera zoomed in on something besides their feet, which seemed to reflect what little light there was. It looked like some shattered glass.

"While we're going to stay here for the night..."

Kaitou raised his brow and continued, *"It's probably not safe right here, with all the glass shards around."*

The camera then moved around. While it was hard to see, if this was the theatre, then they would be in the entrance lobby. From there, one could see the second floor, as well as two flights of stairs and one room. Once again, the camera moved up to show the second floor. It seemed the lobby was surrounded by an atrium. Sugimura and Katsuda then spoke respectively.

"Guess we'll have to find somewhere suitable for sleeping then."

"You're right, before it gets dark."

Nodding in agreement, Kaitou looked around and said, *"Let's split up to search then. Is there a map we could use?"*

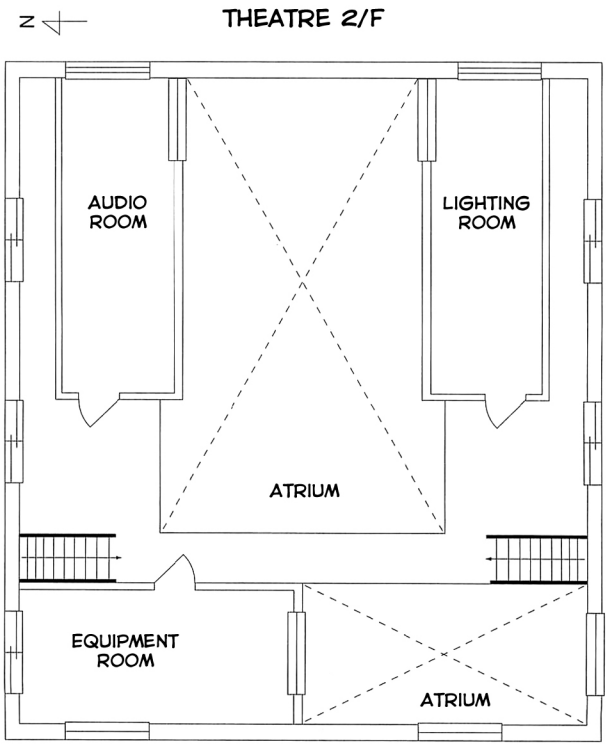
"How about this one?"

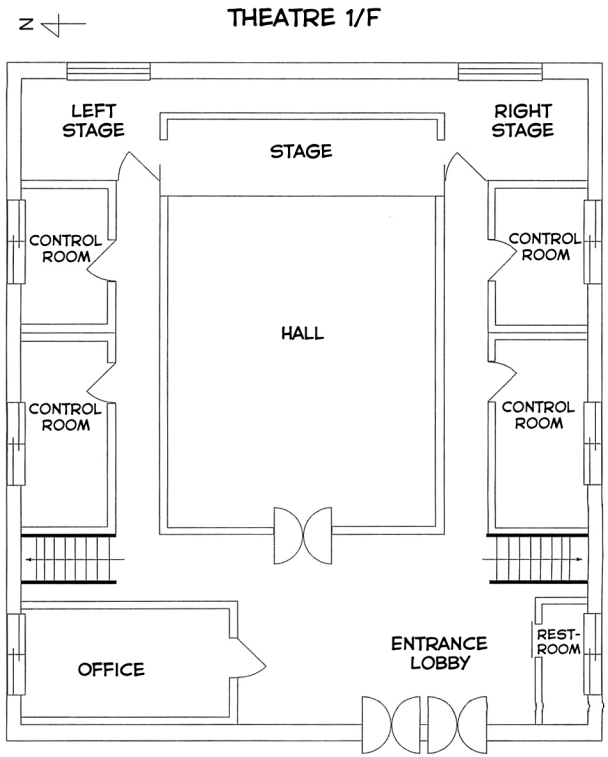
Kounosu beckoned them to come to the side of the entrance, and the movie cut to the next shot.

The following shot showed a map of the theatre which Kounosu was looking at. As it was dark and hard to see, someone should have shone some light on it with a torchlight.

"Aha, a map!"

Satoshi exclaimed gratefully and began to copy that map into his notebook. Though the details were hard to read, as the screen was big, the words were still legible. As the map was shown for about 30 seconds, Satoshi was able to finish copying in time.


N
THEATRE 2/F
AUDIO ROOM
LIGHTING ROOM
ATRIUM
EQUIPMENT ROOM
ATRIUM


N
THEATRE 1/F
LEFT STAGE
STAGE
RIGHT STAGE
CONTROL ROOM
CONTROL ROOM
HALL
CONTROL ROOM
CONTROL ROOM
OFFICE
ENTRANCE LOBBY
REST-ROOM

As shown on the map, the theatre was composed of two storeys. In front of the entrance was the entrance lobby, where the group was right now. Next to the lobby was the office. Going further in was a wall with a set of doors, which led to a hall, and naturally a stage at its end. On both sides of the hall were two corridors, with two control rooms on each side. At the end of those two corridors were the backstage areas. On the right side of the audience hall was the "Right Stage" and on the left, the "Left Stage".

Two flights of stairs on either side of the lobby led to the second floor. The stairs on the right led to the lighting room, with lighting equipment from its side to shine down onto the stage. Above the office was the equipment room, and opposite the lighting room was the audio room. As both sets of stairs led to the same place, it was possible to get to the equipment room via both sides.

The map was also what the group should have seen.

The screen then panned towards Kaitou as he spoke.

"Then let's split up and have a look inside."

"Won't that be dangerous?" asked Katsuda.

"There's nothing but ruins here, what's so dangerous about it?" asked Kaitou.

Senoue then asked, *"But, if we're going to enter the rooms, won't we need a key?"*

Kounosu answered in place of Kaitou, *"That won't be a problem. There's bound to be one..."*

She then entered the office next to the lobby. Incredibly, the office door itself wasn't locked. The camera followed Kounosu into the office, where she looked around two to three times, before noticing a keybox hanging by the wall.

"Here we go."

She then exited the office with one set of keys, leaving the other set inside the box, which the camera remained fixed on. Though the lighting was dark, on the key holder was clearly written "Master Key".

"With this, we should be able to look around the building."

Kounosu returned to the hall and showed the set of keys to Kaitou, who nodded and took out one key from the set.

"Then, let's each take one and see if we can find any rooms that we could stay in. It doesn't matter if we end up in separate rooms. Also have a look for rooms where it's safe to start a fire or clear from any other danger."

Everyone then took one key from the set held by Kounusu, and before long, all the keys were taken.

"You know," Satoshi said while smiling, "Realistically, who would ever think of everyone splitting up and moving on their own in such a situation?"

"Isn't entering an abandoned house in a ruin unrealistic enough? So what's wrong with this scene?"

Satoshi smiled even more, "Nope, nothing's particularly wrong. Since if they didn't split up, we would have no mystery. We're guaranteed one, after all."

"In other words,"

"Something is about to happen soon. I'll bet one cheese hotdog with you that by the time they're all gathered, they'll be one person short."

Sitting next to Satoshi, Ibara looked at me with a grim stare. She was probably saying, *Stop talking about irrelevant stuff and watch the movie already!* ... Even though I wasn't the one that started the conversation.

The screen then showed each member checking the map to find the room their key leads to, and disappearing into the darkness of the building one by one. First it was Kaitou, followed by Sugimura, Yamanishi, Senoue, Katsuda and Kounosu. No one was left inside the lobby. The screen continued showing the empty lobby for a little while before cutting off.

Within the darkness, the narrator spoke again,

"It was here that the incident happened."

"Figures," said Satoshi.

Shut up! Ibara glared at us again.

The next scene opened at the entrance lobby.

Again there was nobody.

Kounosu was the first to return from the stairs on the right.

She was followed by Yamanishi, who came out of the left corridor.

Katsuda too emerged from the left corridor, who then asked the two that arrived before him, *"So? How did it go?"*

Yamanishi replied with a sulky expression, *"It was full of shattered mirror pieces. It's unusable without anything to sweep them away."*

Kounosu too shook her head.

"I see. It's the same here."

Senoue then descended from the stairs on the left. As she approached them, she made an 'X' with her hands to motion that her search was also unsuccessful.

Katsuda looked upwards, and the camera duly followed his gaze. Thereupon, the equipment could be seen via the atrium. After showing the window of that room for an unusually long time, Katsuda could be heard shouting upwards, *"Sugimura, how goes your end?"*

Sugimura stuck his head out from the window and shouted, *"Though it's surprisingly pleasant inside, there's not much we could use to make fire with."*

"I see. Anyway, come down first."

"Okay."

Sugimura promptly came downstairs. There were now five people in the lobby. It seemed all but one of them had returned. I see, so the "victim" has been decided. Yamanishi spoke.

"Where's Kaitou-kun?"

Katsuda shook his head.

"Since we're all here, let's go look for him. I think he headed that way, right?"

He pointed toward the right corridor. The rest all nodded in turn. With Katsuda leading, the group entered the right corridor, with the camera

following them. As they went deeper, the light went dimmer, and before long, nothing could be seen.

Someone turned on a hand torch and illuminated a door in front of the corridor, which Katsuda opened. It was a control room, with a line of mirrors and a bunch of abandoned costumes scattered around. There was no one inside.

"That's strange."

"Could he be in the backstage area?"

Heeding that suggestion, they all went deeper into the corridor, which was even darker.

The hand torch was turned on again, where a door leading to the Right Stage was shown with a sign saying "Staff Entry Only". Katsuda tried turning the doorknob, but it wouldn't open.

"What's wrong?"

"It won't open. Maybe it's locked."

"What do we do?"

"... There's another set of master keys in the office, can someone go get them?"

Without knowing who was being addressed, someone went running off. The sound of footsteps overlapping could be heard; it sounded like two people had run off to get the key. The next cut showed the door lock being turned opened by the key, and the group entering upon opening the door.

Inside the Left Stage was a window. As the curtain was drawn open, the sunlight outside shone in. And in the centre of the sunlit room, someone was lying down on the floor. Naturally, it was Kaitou.

"Kaitou!"

Sugimura rushed towards him, followed by Katsuda. Sugimura knelt down before Kaitou and tried to lift Kaitou up, when he felt something in his palms. The camera moved to show what was within his palms. While it was hard to see with so little light, it seemed that Sugimura's palms were quite stained. He muttered, *"Blood..."*

Someone screamed. The camera turned to face the three girls standing by the door. Yamanishi was lost for words as she covered her mouth, Senoue held her hands together, while Kounosu gripped her fists. Blood stains were flowing out from the abdomen of the collapsed Kaitou, whose eyes were closed. It was just as well, as his crappy performance would have been exposed if he chose to have his eyes opened. The camera then panned towards Kaitou's side, which showed his arm being severed. Probably some prop. The dark lighting helped raise the tension as the camera slowly revealed within the severed arm was the key that Kaitou had taken with him.

"Ahh..."

Someone gasped while watching the scene. It was Chitanda.

Back to the movie, Katsuda yelled, *"Kaitou! Dammit! Somebody help!"*

He quickly stood up and headed toward the window to try and open it, which was designed to be opened while pulling upwards. But as the window had not been used for so many years, it didn't seem to be able to open. Katsuda pressed his hands against the window frame and used his full strength to pull the window upward, which created a loud squeaking noise. Upon finally opening the window, he stuck his body out and looked outside. The camera showed what was outside the window - nothing but a thick layer of wild grass.

Katsuda returned inside and headed toward the stage. The screen suddenly went dark while going from the illuminated room into the dark stage; it was clear it was following Katsuda, who ran straight toward the Left Stage, where he came to a stop. The door connecting the Left Stage and the left corridor was blocked by some boards of squared timber.

"No way..."

The screen faded to black.

And then,

The movie seemed to have ended right there.

"....."

We waited for a little longer, but the screen didn't come back on.

"Huh, it's over?" Ibara whispered in an annoyed tone.

"..... Seems so."

As if on cue, upon Satoshi's response, a mechanical sound was heard, followed by the screen being drawn upwards. As though trying to stop the screen from withdrawing, Chitanda stretched her arms forward pitifully.

"Eh? Eh? But it's not over!"

"Maybe they're having some technical difficulties?" I said to her, though a voice from behind instantly replied, "No, that is incorrect."

As we turned around, Irisu had already exited the control room and stood behind us, holding the videotape in her hand.

"The tape indeed ends here."

She said in a calm tone. Of course she would know exactly when the tape ends. Satoshi asked, "So, is that the end of the story, if that's where you intended it to end?"

"Of course not."

Then it means that this tape was incomplete. I've never heard of a movie preview where people are invited to watch a movie that has yet to be completed.

Muttering under my breath, I asked, "Would you please care to explain what's going on? This 'preview' isn't gonna end here, is it?"

Irisu was constantly looking at me as she nodded.

"Of course not. But before that, I would like to hear something from all of you... What did you think of the movie you just saw? In terms of its cinematography?"

We exchanged glances with each other. I didn't know about Chitanda, but I was sure the rest of us were in agreement. Ibara replied on our behalf, "To be very honest, we thought it was crudely done."

That answer was to be expected.

"That was what I thought as well... You may probably have known this already, but the Kanya Festival is a festival mainly for the arts-related clubs. There was no place for activities by individual classes. However, our class was not content with that. We could not enlist the help of people with the required skills, as they're already busy with their own club activities, but despite that, we still decided to make something of our own.

We merely wanted to show people the result of our passion and hard work."

She described such a bitter reality in a plain manner devoid of any emotion.

However, were they satisfied with just that? As I was thinking, Irisu spoke again.

"I thought this was good enough, as everyone is enjoying what they're doing and making something of their own. Even though the end product will end up being laughed at, they wouldn't be too concerned at all, as they're easily satisfied. I know it's quite silly, so I would please ask that you turn a blind eye to how crudely they made the movie."

"So it doesn't matter whether it's crudely done or not?"

Irisu nodded in answer to Ibara's question.

"It's not really too much to ask, is it? If it's well made, they would also be satisfied on a different level. Yet the essence of their objective remains the same... Now, what do you think would happen if something calamitous occurred during the making of the movie?"

After thinking for a while, Satoshi replied, "The movie wouldn't be completed."

"Exactly. And we are not satisfied with that. However, we cannot complete the movie. As you have seen, the location for the movie is quite unique, and we could only go there to shoot during summer vacation."

"Are you having some problems with the cinematography?" Chitanda asked anxiously.

"While that's a problem as well, I'm sure they can sort that out eventually. Taking into consideration our traveling budget and script progress, our

schedule was to film on location twice. According to our plans, we should be going once again this Sunday to complete the movie."

"But something else happened?"

Faced with my cold remark, Irisu responded truthfully, "Yes, we never expected assigning work to an unskilled amateur would create such strain. When we all decided on making a movie, it was agreed that it would be a mystery movie. However, we had no one capable of writing such a script. Only one person amongst us had any experience writing stories; her name is Hongou Mayu. She had some experience writing manga, so we entrusted her to come up with a script for a one-hour movie."

For someone who's never written any stories before, I had no idea how tough such an assignment was, though I noticed Ibara raising her brow. She too had experience writing manga, so she's probably sympathizing with Hongou.

"Hongou was amazing. She had managed to come up with a script despite not having any contact with mystery novels before. However, she was at her limit, and by the time she wrote up to the part where you saw in the movie, she collapsed."

Collapsed, meaning she's not alright. Chitanda gasped and asked, "What happened to her?"

"Gastritis from stress, a form of depression. Though it's nothing serious, it's not possible for her to continue her task, so we're seeking out a replacement writer."

Sounds like replacement on the battlefield.

"You're not seriously asking us to do that, are you?"

Taking over the role of screenwriter for them?

Irisu laughed softly and said, "Oh, no. We wouldn't impose on you so far. I merely invited you to a preview, and would like to ask one question of you... Who did you think was the killer?"

Come to think of it, the movie didn't seem to have anyone resembling a detective character despite this being a mystery movie. That was probably one of the reasons why the movie couldn't make any progress. The second reason was probably due to every actor being assigned similar screen time, resulting in the audience being unable to determine who will play the detective. However... While I was still far from convinced, Ibara was the first to reply.

"But Sempai, surely the movie must include scenes for us to deduce who the killer is before we could guess?"

Irisu shook her head and said, "You need not worry about that. Hongou said she had already written the outline of the resolution before she collapsed, and we should be able to get that part filmed in time."

Satoshi inquired further, "But if it's a script written by a beginner in detective fiction, surely she would have left clues before coming to the resolution, or it would seem quite awkward."

"That has also been taken care of. She managed to put in everything her wits had to offer. She did say she did some research into detective fiction after all. I believe she stayed true to both Knox and Chandler's Ten Commandments and Van Dine's Twenty Rules."

Chitanda looked puzzled at the mention of the Ten Commandments; I probably did as well.

"Ten Commandments? As in 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'?"

Why did she have to quote such a minor Commandment of all Commandments? Satoshi answered confidently at Chitanda's question, "No, that's Moses' Ten Commandments. We're talking about Ronald Knox's Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction here, rules like 'No Chinaman must figure in the story'. Hongou-san must have studied those rules to ensure fair play - giving the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery."

Why can't a Chinaman appear in a story anyway? Does their appearance, no matter how entertaining it is, have something to do with politics or some other issue? Then again, these rules are often seen in science fiction as well... Though I don't think it has anything to do with fair play. I wonder if I could find the answer if I researched Knox?

As I was pondering these questions, Irisu concluded, "In other words, all the clues have been shown... so who do you think the killer is?"

Asking us to figure out who the killer was in an abandoned village deep within the mountains, huh? This sounds ridiculous.

Satoshi, Ibara and Chitanda all exchanged glances with each other.

"Who, you're asking me? That's kind of hard. Conclusions cannot be made from the database."

"You're right, I'm not confident I'll be able to solve this myself... Though I do suspect a few things."

"Um, is Kaitou-san confirmed dead already in the movie?"

Upon asking all the questions they wanted to ask, they all turned to look at me at the same time. I could feel my back drooping slightly as their

gazes were fixed upon me. I tried to turn my eyes beyond their glare and said, "... What?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking this was perhaps a job for Houtarou."

Satoshi smiled impudently as usual.

"What job are you talking about?"

"The detective, of course."

I could totally imagine what sort of expression I was making then, which Satoshi was quick to describe.

"You look as though you don't like that."

I nodded silently. As a normal high school student and fervent energy saver, there's no way I would ever get myself involved in anything out of the ordinary. I feel troubled by being so overestimated. In response to my expression,

"It probably means you weren't paying enough attention to the movie," Chitanda interrupted with her voice raised, "So why don't we watch it one more time?"

Is she serious?

As though sensing my thoughts, Irisu intervened and said, "I'm just asking you for an opinion. You don't have to be too serious about it."

"Is that so? Then I think Yamanishi's the killer."

Chitanda turned her head to me and asked, "How come?"

"Because she had a terrible attitude?"

"Oreki!"

Ibara scolded me with a sharp voice, though I was hardly intimidated. Ibara's only scary when you've truly made a serious mistake, but I was not exactly wrong with my guess here.

"Then Katsuda, he looked quite muscular."

Satoshi sighed and crossed his arms.

"Hmm, you don't seem to be too eager about this? Even I feel like saying 'Stop saying strange stuff already'."

It's not exactly strange, but that itself won't do, as they don't seem to be convinced. I decided to confirm something with Irisu.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are you asking an outsider like us? If this question was conceived by Class 2-F, surely it ought to be figured out by someone from Class 2-F as well?"

As with before, Irisu nodded and replied, "We did discuss this question amongst ourselves, though we wish to receive more suggestions from outside. No matter what theories we proposed, we were still clueless in answering it. Like I said before, only those with the necessary skills can do the job required."

"Not even you could do it?"

"Unfortunately, no. More than anyone, I too would like to figure out who the killer is. Moreover, I have to take care of the filming operation, so I'm quite short on time here."

"In that case, why didn't you start anew with something other than mystery then?"

It was starting to become like a cross-examination. For the first time, Irisu lowered her eyes, though she still maintained her stern voice.

"I was not present in the original planning stages, as I happened to be in Hokkaido for the past three weeks. I only heard about the problem from the director upon returning to Kamiyama, and it was only the day before yesterday that I agreed to try and solve this problem. If I had been involved from the beginning, I would not have agreed to make a mystery movie."

Then it has nothing to do with you, does it? You're just doing it out of pity for your classmates. ... Though that's what I thought, naturally, I couldn't say that out loud.

So I modified my question a bit.

"Secondly, why us? I know you're acquainted with Chitanda, but it seemed like you had intended for us to come all along. There are about a thousand students in Kami High, why did you specifically choose the Classics Club?"

"Well, it's given that I knew Chitanda personally,"

We probably came because of that, as she knew Chitanda would probably be interested in it. Irisu then met my gaze and continued, "Furthermore, you are present."

"Me?"

That was a surprising answer. I could sense Chitanda, Satoshi and Ibara looking at me. Though it was mainly down to luck, those involved in investigating the "Hyouka" incident all seemed surprised at how it was solved. But how did an outsider like Irisu find out about that?

Irisu slowly explained the reason, "I have heard much about you from three people: The first is Chitanda here, the second is someone from

outside the school, while the third is Toogaito Shouji. I'm sure you've met him before."

"Who?"

"Oreki! How can you forget!? He's the Wall Newspaper Club President!"

Oh! Him. Now I remember. Upon mentioning his name, I suddenly felt daunted.

Toogaito was a third year whom I crossed paths with before. To put a long story short, I managed to obtain knowledge of a dirty secret of his and used it to my advantage to blackmail him. It's not something I'd like to recall too much. Irisu seemed to be able to read my thoughts as she said, "Don't worry. Toogaito does not think badly of you at all."

Well then, do tell him I bless his good soul.

"When I realized there was no one else who had the skills to finish the story, I immediately thought of you. If it was you, you might be able to play the role of the 'detective'."

"....."

"That's amazing, Houtarou! Your talents are being recognized!"

I glared at Satoshi for his teasing before returning my gaze to Irisu and sighed. Me? A detective? I gave my honest reply.

"I feel quite uneasy to have such expectations placed on me."

Surprisingly, Irisu was quick to withdraw her stance.

"You're right."

She sighed and continued, "I was merely making a gamble while deciding to invite you to watch the preview, in the hope that the problem

could be solved as soon as possible. But I was indeed naive... I apologize for causing you such distress."

She bowed upon saying that.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

In awe of her vigour, even if I had any further questions, I was left speechless.

Upon confirming there were no more questions, Irisu quickly wrapped things up.

"Then this ends the preview. Thank you for coming."

However, the story did not end here. I had totally forgotten the presence of a certain person. Indeed, it was none other than Chitanda Eru, the very incarnation of Curiosity itself, who would go to all lengths to solve every mystery the universe had to offer.

As Irisu was about to turn away, Chitanda called out to her, "Please wait!"

"... Is something the matter?"

"Um, then how would the story end? What's going to happen next?"

Irisu said as she turned back around, "We don't know, we're still working on it. But you must be prepared to accept that it may never be finished."

"That would be terrible."

Terrible? ... Well, Irisu's feeling terrible as well. Chitanda then stepped up her reasoning.

"Irisu-san, if what you said was true, then it would be a pity if the movie could not be completed. I don't want that to happen."

Well, neither does Irisu, but even if you say that...

"Besides, besides,"

I started to raise my brows worryingly. This was bad, something was about to happen. Irisu probably made the right choice in picking Chitanda to solve her problem.

"Why did the screenwriter Hongou Mayu-san, upon being entrusted with the role, decide that the role was so important that she worked till she collapsed? ... I'm *really* curious about it."

Standing beside me, Satoshi spoke.

"Houtarou, whether it's as a 'detective' or whatever, don't you think we have insufficient data needed to solve this?"

"Indeed."

"That means we'll just have to gather the clues ourselves, right?"

It's not as easy as it sounds.

Yet upon hearing that, and this was probably Satoshi's plan all along, Chitanda quickly turned towards us with great vigour and said, "Oreki-san, let's do this! We must find out what Hongou-san's legacy was!"

"Hongou's still alive."

Irisu calmly corrected her, though I had no idea whether our lady heard that.

Satoshi spoke once again.

"Mayaka, how goes the progress for the anthology? You think we could take time off for a week to solve this?"

Ibara replied with a sour look, "The only one not making any progress is you, Fuku-chan. I've pretty much finished my alloted segment already."

"N-now, don't sweat the small stuff."

Ibara then added as though muttering, "I too would like to see this movie completed. Despite its poor cinematography, I never thought images of abandoned villages would look so stunning."

As for me...

I really was no good at dealing with Chitanda. Since it had come to this, even if I had refused, I would not have be able to escape from her. If I had tried to escape, I would merely end up expending lots of energy, which would be a waste. And I hate wasting energy.

But, this time...

I just didn't feel like accepting Irisu's offer to play the role of "detective". Despite my energy saving motto, this time my reason was altogether different. I didn't know whether the other three realized it or not, but even if they did, I decided to ignore them as I said coldly, "Let's say we accept this challenge. What if we fail? Do we have to bow apologetically on all fours to the dissatisfied members of Class 2-F?"

For starters, we were not members of the Detective Fiction Study Club. We're members of the Classics Club, a club whose activities were yet to be known. For me, I firmly believed that solving the "Hyouka" incident was mainly due to luck. As Irisu's offer promised little in return, why should we bear the burden of taking care of Class 2-F's project?

Chitanda felt as though she had had a bucket of water poured on her upon hearing these harsh words. Ibara felt like rebutting, and was about to open her mouth.

It was at this perfect timing that Irisu decided to offer a compromise.

"Then, we will not ask you to play the role of 'detective'. As there are also people in my class that would like to take on that role. Instead, what do you think if we ask you to act as 'observer' and decide whether their deductions make sense?"

An observer, huh? If it's to determine whether someone is the killer or not, then that role would be akin to judge and jury. If that's the case, our burden would be considerably lighter.

As an energy saver, my urge to turn down this offer had increased, though it was probably not enough to convince Chitanda, whose eyes were beginning to tear up.

So I said reluctantly, "We can do that, I guess."

Upon hearing that, Chitanda smiled again, while Ibara crossed her arms, Satoshi gave me a thumbs-up, and Irisu bowed her head in admiration. Darn, I got dragged into something bothersome again. Oh well, I sighed in my heart and thought, if all we had to do was sit and listen, then I could do that.

... By the way, for an instant, upon raising her head, Irisu looked as though she had just successfully accomplished something. Was that my imagination?

2 - The Murder in the Abandoned Village of Furuoka

Upon returning to the Geology Room after returning from the preview, Satoshi spoke.

"Irisu Fuyumi is pretty well-known, you know?"

"Really? So does she have three different faces on her head or something like that?"

"Well, I dunno about that, but I wouldn't be surprised if she did. I've mentioned this before, but Irisu belongs to one of the clans that rival the four Exponential Clans."

The Exponential Clans refer to the Juumonjis, Sarusuberis, Chitandas and Manninbashis, seemingly four of the most prominent old families in Kamiyama City. By the way, this rather weird term for them seems to have been coined by Satoshi himself, as I've only heard Satoshi use it.

Satoshi pointed to the streets outside the window.

"The Irisus run the Rengou Hospital over there."

The building that Satoshi was pointing at seemed to be Rengou Hospital, alright. It's a private general hospital with facilities on par with those run by the Japanese Red Cross. As it's only a five minute walk from Kamiyama High School, any students that get injured or sick would end up visiting them. I see, so that's why Irisu Fuyumi is famous.

Though I was starting to be convinced, Satoshi didn't stop there.

"But that's not the only thing Irisu Fuyumi is famous for. She has another nickname."

"Really?"

"So how about it, Houtarou? Wanna guess what it is?"

While I have no intention of attending a game show, I decided to think about it upon being asked. If it's Satoshi that's asking such a question, then Ibara-style nicknames like "Iri-chan" would be out of the question. Since she has that ice-cold aura of grace about her, something that would make her classmates shiver, then...

"Theresa."

Satoshi smiled broadly.

"Amazing! You were actually very close. It's 'the Empress' to be precise. Just think about it, to be entrusted with solving something by 'the Empress', doesn't it sound awesome?"

The Empress, yet another very exaggerated nickname. For her to be honoured with such a name...

"Is she sadistic or what?"

Ibara, who was speaking to Chitanda for some reason, now turned around to interject, "That would be a dominatrix, not an empress."

She then turned her back to us again. I admire her ability to quip at will.

"I see. Then why is she called 'the Empress'?"

"Well, she's pretty and all that, plus she's good at making people do her bidding with a cool attitude. It always seemed like she could control the people around her with ease."

"Really?"

"Take the incident with the Student Council Committee meeting with her that I mentioned earlier as an example. Irisu-sempai managed to see through to the root of the problem between the three debating members,

and directed them into taking turns listing their points, thus leading to a resolution as a result."

Sounds amazing. She was able to deduce a problem just from listening. She seemed to be the sort of commander-type person. Yet because of that, things have now developed in a way not to my liking. I had no intention of doing anything for anyone, but I've ended up doing an errand for her.

As I crossed my arms, Satoshi tapped his fingers on the table. Just as he had stopped his rhythmic tapping, I saw him grinning once again.

"Besides,"

"Besides what?"

"Since we're talking about 'the Empress' and all that stuff, how about we assign a symbol for ourselves as well?"

"A symbol?"

For a short while, I was led on by Satoshi. Before long, he continued, "First, Mayaka would be 'Justice'."

"The Empress" and "Justice", huh? As a person of reason who hardly believed in any superstitions, even I knew he was referring to Tarot cards. Satoshi spoke in a voice which Ibara could hear, so I duly kept quiet to see how things would develop.

As expected, Ibara snapped back at us from across the classroom, "And why am I a guardian of justice anyway?"

Satoshi turned around to face her.

"Not a guardian of justice. You're confusing it with 'Judgment'. People of the 'Justice' types tend to be stern with themselves, right?"

He seemed to be blowing off steam. While I had absolutely no idea what meaning the card 'Justice' holds, Satoshi's description pretty much matched Ibara quite well. As I was thinking that, Ibara turned to glare at me.

"What's so funny!?"

"Hey! You should complain to Satoshi, not me."

"Even if Fuku-chan was talking about me, you weren't exactly listening, so you're not supposed to comment either!"

... What a way to justify things.

Her interest ignited, Ibara got up from her seat, and so too did Chitanda. The girls then walked towards us. Ibara leaned her flat chest towards Satoshi and asked, "So, what would Fuku-chan be then?"

"Me? Hmm, I'd be 'the Fool', I guess... No, more like 'the Magician'. 'The Fool' would be Chitanda-san."

How thoughtlessly rude for him to call someone a fool. Yet Chitanda didn't seem to have taken it badly. Just to be safe, Satoshi added, "I don't mean any disrespect, by the way. But I'm sure Chitanda-san gets what I'm saying."

Chitanda slowly opened her mouth.

"Yes, I do. Now that you mention it, I do match the description for 'the Fool', I don't think it's anything disparaging, but... Fukube-san, you do indeed suit the image of 'the Magician'."

Seems like they were talking about the hidden meaning behind each Tarot card. While Satoshi and Chitanda each understood what the other was saying concerning Tarot cards, I was completely out of the loop.

While Ibara was also involved in the conversation, she probably didn't get it either.

"Then what about Oreki-san?"

Satoshi replied right away, "That would be easy, 'Strength'."

"? Why is that? I thought he would be more like 'the Star'..."

"No, he's definitely 'Strength', fits him to a tee."

He smiled as I slowly realized he was jesting with me. Chitanda tilted her head while trying to think, but still could not comprehend what he was saying. Neither me nor Ibara could find anything to say either.

"But why is that?"

"Well, no, 'the Star' would also suit him."

Satoshi somehow evaded her question. Chitanda now tilted her head from left to right, but fortunately, she didn't go "I'm *really* curious about it" this time. I leaned further back in my chair as I frowned.

"... Hmph. It's not like you're complimenting me, anyway."

"Oh, no, that's not the case at all!"

He smiled briefly again. An annoying fellow he was.

The subject then moved on to something else. While the day turned out to be quite unproductive, efficiency-wise, not much energy was expended anyway. I'm sure things will be the same tomorrow.

The following day.

The Classics Club gathered in full force at the club room - though we've only got four members in total. Its objective today was to kill time..... sorry, I mean, to review a murder mystery. To think that I would take time off this sacred summer vacation just to come to school, I've become rather active lately, or so I joked to myself. All in all, this was all Chitanda's fault..... To be truthful, I didn't want to come, but guessing my intentions, Satoshi called me and said if I didn't, our most gracious lady would personally come to my house herself to pick me up, in all her vigour as well.

For some reason, Chitanda seemed pretty pleased as she grinned, which was in contrast to me sighing besides her. On the other hand, Satoshi and Ibara began discussing today's agenda,

"Guess we would have to visit the scene of crime after all."

"But that's all the way in Furuoka Town. Are we seriously going there? Though it's approachable by bus, it's still quite a long train ride away."

"A detective does not do his work on foot, huh? That said, it's only twenty kilometres from here, should be just right if we go by bike."

"Rather than working on foot, this feels more like a standard police field investigation than detective work....."

Twenty kilometres? Gimme a break. I thought we were supposed to just listen to what the "detectives" of Class 2-F have to say.

But how exactly do we hear from them? We have hardly met anyone from Class 2-F, so it'd be awkward for lower classmen like us to suddenly go and ask them for their opinion. Besides, we have absolutely no idea who we should first listen to. As I was wondering what we should do, I noticed Chitanda was looking quite calm.

"Chitanda, is something going to happen today?"

Upon being asked, she nodded.

"Really? So what is it?"

"Irisu-san will be sending a representative to guide us to hear from the movie crew."

A representative? That means this has all been sorted out already. Come to think of it, this made sense.

"When did you sort this out with her anyway?"

Chitanda spoke as though revealing a secret,

"Actually..... I was using a browser."

A browser?

"Stop saying things so strangely. Just say you communicated via the internet, it's not so strange nowadays, is it?"

"Just a moment there, Houtarou. Technically, she's using the world wide web, not the internet."

I ignored Satoshi's protests and continued,

"So, what did you do over the internet?"

"I was in a student-only chatroom on the Kamiyama High School website."

"You got the expression wrong, Chitanda-san. It's accessing the chatroom *via* the website."

Chitanda ignored Satoshi as well and went on,

"And I communicated with Irisu-san there. She said she may not be able to come herself, but she's arranged a place for us to meet with her classmates, and will send a guide to lead us to them."

Hmm, she was quite prepared for this. Though it may be somewhat bothersome, at least for an Empress, she wasn't simply sitting on her throne with her legs stretched out doing nothing.

Chitanda looked up at the clock above the blackboard. It was just past one.

"It is almost near the appointed time. She should be here any moment now."

As though right on cue, the door opened quietly.

The person that entered the Geology Room was a girl, who was shorter than Chitanda but taller than Ibara. In other words, she was of average height. Overall, she was of small stature. If there was anything special about her appearance, it would be her short hair, which reached to the back of her neck. While I'm no expert in fashion, at least I knew such a mature hairdo was quite rare for girls her age. Coupled with her thin lips, she gave me the impression of a polite person.

Upon entering, she gave us a deep bow.

"Is this the Classics Club room?"

Chitanda replied right away, "Yes, it is... Are you from Class 2-F?"

"Yes. My name is Eba Kurako. Pleased to meet you."

She bowed courteously once again, and deeply as well, despite the fact that we were her underclassmen. The girl called Eba then raised her head up to look at us and spoke in a business-like manner.

"Today, I have been entrusted by Irisu to guide you to meet a member of our class project's filming division... Shall I lead the way if you're ready?"

It's not like we have anything to prepare anyway. I stood up to indicate I could leave right away, and the others did the same. Eba nodded and said, "Then let us go."

We duly left the Geology Room at her words. While we were merely going to listen to people's opinions, I just had a bad feeling about this, as though we were merely going along with the flow.

The sound of the brass band blowing their instruments was heard on the corridor. As I was wondering why that melody sounded so familiar, I realized it was the theme song for Lupin III. Humming along with the tune, Satoshi approached my side as though amplifying the music and said to me, "She's like a butler, isn't she?"

Was he talking about Eba? Thinking about it, she sure did match the description.

The music faded a bit as we descended down the stairs. Eba then stopped and turned to face us.

"Feel free to ask any questions you'd like."

Speaking in a casual tone, Ibara was the first to ask the first question that came to her mind.

"Who will we be speaking to today?"

"His name is Nakajou Junya."

I looked at Satoshi to ask whether he knew this guy, to which he shook his head. Didn't sound like someone famous, I guess.

"What does he do?"

"He's the assistant director of the filming division, so he's most familiar with the scenes that have been shot."

Chitanda then asked, "When you say filming division, does that mean there are other divisions involved in making the movie as well?"

Eba nodded.

"The project is split between three divisions. The filming division was the one that went to Narakubo to film on location. The other two divisions are the props division and the marketing division."

"Then the actors would come from..."

"The filming division, as it's the biggest division with twelve people in total. This is followed by seven from the props division and five in the marketing division."

That's quite a lot of people. To be honest, I was in awe of them.

Chitanda then asked a natural question.

"What about you, Eba-sempai?"

As with before, Eba answered without delay.

"I was not a member of the project... as I wasn't particularly interested in it."

I grinned, as that was my preferred type of answer as well.

We then came to the connecting corridor linking the Special Block with the General Block. As its name suggests, the General Block contains

regular classrooms. There was less activity related to the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival on this side. Unlike the Special Block, there were more empty classrooms.

Eba stopped right in front of one of those seemingly empty classrooms. Looking up at the plate, it indicated the classroom for 2-C. But Irisu should be from 2-F. Upon seeing our faces, Eba explained, "It would be better to discuss in a quieter classroom, as I was told. As Class 2-C have no exhibition whatsoever, no one will disturb you during your discussions."

She then opened the door.

It was a typical classroom. Symbolized by the usual desks, chairs, teaching podium and blackboard, there was nothing else.

Sitting at the front of the room was a guy with his arms crossed. He seemed to be of the muscular type with his hulky arms. He also had thick eyebrows and a stubbly chin, though it did seem like he had shaved somewhat... This should be the assistant director, Nakajou Junya. Upon seeing us, he stood up with composure and spoke with an unnecessarily loud voice.

"So you're the guys who're familiar with the mystery?"

So he said.

I felt tempted to reply that we were not exactly familiar with anything, as I wasn't particularly interested in making fun of people. As we kept silent, Eba spoke on our behalf.

"Yes. These are the capable people that Irisu managed to find. So do be respectful."

She then turned towards us and introduced Nakajou.

"This is Nakajou Junya."

Nakajou lifted his chin upwards. It seemed he was greeting us.

Chitanda stepped forward to introduce herself.

"I'm Chitanda Eru of the Classics Club."

She then introduced us one by one, with me the last one being named. Eba led us to sit opposite of Nakajou. As we all took our seats, Eba said, "I shall be taking my leave. I leave the matter in your hands now."

And left the classroom. She's not staying behind? So she really was playing the role of Irisu's "butler".

Being left behind, we now faced Nakajou. Let's start this then.

Nakajou crossed his arms as he slowly began, "Sorry to get you involved in all this. As this is a project started out of interest, it'd be a pity if we couldn't finish it. So we had to ask for some help."

I see, out of interest, huh?

"I'm sure you've heard everything from Irisu. Everything is as she said."

Pretty straightforward fellow. Before I was a bit worried about how a senior would take an underclassman criticising his theories, but seeing how Eba and Nakajou have conducted themselves, they're hardly bothersome to handle.

Sitting beside me, Satoshi stuck his hand inside his drawstring bag, and took out a leather-covered notebook and a fountain pen, and duly opened the notebook as though declaring himself the official scribe.

While it was fine for Nakajou to start right away, most of us didn't seem to have grasped our situation yet. Firstly, Ibara decided she had to start with some formal niceties.

"It must be terrible, Sempai, for the script to not be completed. I was surprised when I heard that."

Nakajou nodded in an exaggerated way.

"Exactly. We've come all this way. We never thought something like this could have happened."

"Is the filming tough?"

"We get through the acting parts with the occasional ad-lib, since we're having fun anyway. The tough part is actually the traveling, since it takes an hour to get there by train and bus, and we could only film there on Sundays. I still wonder why we selected that place for our location."

I noticed Ibara squinting her eyes.

"So why did you?"

"Hmm? The location? Well, someone suggested that the place was interesting to go have a look. It's true that we've shot some amazing scenery there that we won't find anywhere else, and that's good and all, but I still think it's too far."

So Irisu was right when she said she wasn't involved in the planning stages of the movie. If I had to vote on whether to head to a place where a round trip takes two hours, I'd definitely oppose it.

Probably realizing we were getting nowhere near the main topic, Satoshi lifted his gaze from his notebook and asked, "I heard the Narakubo area is an abandoned village. Is it reachable by bus?"

"Well, we traveled via minibus. It's a chartered bus rented from a hotel where a relative of mine works."

"So the place isn't restricted to outsiders?"

"We had to pull some strings in order to get in, as the place is still run by the mining company. We had people who knew someone from the company, though all he did was ask if we could enter the premises."

"You could only go there on Sundays?"

"While Narakubo's an abandoned village, the mining facilities are still operating. The noise generated by the mining would just get in the way of shooting. Not to mention cars would occasionally drive by at high speeds, so there's no guarantee of our safety, and all that stuff... Does this have something to do with your case?"

Satoshi smiled.

"Oh no, just curious. I learned something new."

Don't mind him, Nakajou-sempai, that's just the kind of person Satoshi is. I said in my mind.

Next was Chitanda.

"How is the scriptwriter, Hongou-san, doing now?

"Hongou? While I'm not sure of the details, I hear she's not feeling quite well. I can't really blame her, can I?"

Nakajou replied and raised his brow. Assuming Irisu was right, Hongou's probably been under so much pressure from everyone in Class 2-F that she fell ill because of it. It's probably hard for them to even contemplate blaming her or demanding an apology from her, which was what Nakajou was expressing in his demeanor.

Most likely not sensing such sentiments at all, Chitanda maintained her gentle disposition.

"Is Hongou-san a very delicate person?"

Nakajou moved his brows quickly and groaned deeply.

"I've never seen her that way, though. Rather than delicate mentally, she's more delicate on the physical side."

"So she has a tender physique?"

What kind of description is that? I instantly spoke without thinking.

"He means she's often getting sick."

"Exactly. She's taken leave from school many times now, and she couldn't even come to the filming location."

Nakajou showed some regret as he said that. Logically speaking, you don't really require the scriptwriter's presence in order to film something. If things don't go according to script, they could just adapt accordingly, and everyone would know what to do even without Hongou around... since the script would have already been written to begin with.

Being mindful of this, I asked, "Is Hongou-sempai's script being received badly by anyone in the class?"

Nakajou gave an indignant expression.

"No one thought that way. As I said, no one blamed her for what happened."

"So you mean what you said?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What are you trying to say? Everybody, including myself of course, recognizes Hongou's role and knows how important her involvement is."

Yet Hongou collapsed before she could complete her work. If that's the case, then it'd be like Chitanda put it, Hongou was probably a bit too delicate.

In order to change focus from the unpleasant atmosphere, Ibara cleared her throat and said, "By the way, Sempai,"

"Yes?"

"While we know the script made no mention of who the killer is, what if it's actually a sort of filming trick, where someone has already been assigned the role without it being mentioned in the script?"

A bold suggestion. But if that's true, it'll make things much easier and our role as observers would be rendered obsolete. Nakajou crossed his arms once again as he tried to recall from his memory.

"...Hmm"

"Well?"

"I don't recall something like that... No, wait... Come to think of it, Kounosu was saying something like 'let's give it our all' or something like that..."

Anyone could have said "let's give it our all". Ibara must have beeen thinking the same thing, as her disappointment showed on her face for a brief moment, though she quickly suppressed it and asked, "Then, have you asked the actors themselves? About whether they've been assigned the role or not?"

"We did, and they all said they'd heard no such thing."

She bit her lips.

"Then what about the detective role?"

"That too."

Sigh

Come on, you can do this, Ibara. She then asked, "How about this then? Was it ever mentioned whether this filming trick is a physical one or a psychological one?"

Nakajou looked puzzled at that question.

"What's the difference?"

As I wondered what sort of reaction Ibara would give, our eyes met. She slowly shook her head with a mix of irritation and resignation on her face. If Nakajou wasn't there, she would probably have disregarded etiquette altogether and sighed loudly as well.

We then asked a series of questions, but in the end, it didn't seem like Nakajou held any vital information at all. Then again, if he did, there would not have been a problem to begin with. Besides, we were too ill-prepared and were unable to come up with questions that could turn attention to anything vital. As an energy-saver, this was a massive blunder for me. If I have to do something, make it quick. I ought to have started asking the right questions in the appropriate sequence.

Yet Nakajou spoke looking as though he was satisfied.

"Will that be all?"

Ibara replied with a smile, "If you mean whether we're done with our questions, yes, that will be all."

Why did I get the feeling her sarcasm was aimed at both sides?

As we've gotten our collection of information, Satoshi closed his fountain pen. Upon that signal, Chitanda asked calmly, "It's Nakajou-san, right? What do you think of what Hongou Mayu-san intended to do with her script?"

Realizing we'd entered the main topic, Nakajou gave a broad smile.

"Alright, be easy on me and hear me out."

"Please do begin."

I was wondering whether Nakajou should be feeling happy at such a time. As he licked his lips and started speaking, it turned out he could actually speak quite a lot.

"If you think about it, such a filming technique may cause some fuss, but I don't think the audience should pay much attention to it and just treat it as a plot device. After all, good drama should always have the detective identifying the killer before everyone else, forcing the killer to confess to how and why he did it. While I can't possibly take over what Hongou is doing, if you ask me, I thought she was rather weak when it came to writing an exciting story. We don't even know who the main character is.

It would be good if Kaitou were the one that died. You may not know this, but Kaitou is actually quite well-liked. The people from the props division said they were quite impressed by how dead he looked in that scene. As expected from a popular person to give such a performance. While it's not exactly a good idea to have the protagonist as the killer, it's not impossible either. So I think the killer is Yamanishi, since she also has many friends."

.....

"Generally speaking, our classmates can be quite obsessive when it comes to some stuff. That includes writing a mystery story, where they would argue about how this part isn't exactly mystery, or how that part doesn't feel right. But the movie would only last for an hour. If they were to include every aspect of mystery fiction in it, we wouldn't be able to film them all in time. And I'm sure you've all noticed, you could hardly see any clear details on such a small screen. So I think this is more of a drama story. We could still stick with a title of 'The Murder in the Abandoned Village of Furuoka" or something like that, just to entice the audience to come watch it. I'm sure that's what Hongou would think as well."

How should I say this. I was in a daze for half of the time Nakajou was speaking. I'm not that much of a fan of detective fiction. I would usually buy paperback novels to read in my spare time, and there would be the occasional mystery genre amongst them, but that's about it. Besides, I find something strange about Nakajou declaring that the audience wouldn't care about such filming techniques.

...But thinking about it a bit more, just what sort of person would be coming to watch a movie produced by Class 2-F?

There would probably be people from the Detective Fiction Studies Club, no doubt, but how many of these people would have read detective fiction? This wasn't some baseless speculation, as there was once this silly questionnaire run by the Kami High Monthly which investigated the "Literacy of Kami High Students". Recalling how Satoshi was reading enthusiastically about it, I remember that the findings said that about 40% of the students have read at least one novel. And of those 40%, how many of them would have read detective fiction to know how to notice such a filming trick to begin with?

Thinking along such lines, Nakajou's theory may have some foundation after all.

Crossing his legs as well as his arms, Nakajou continued, "Yet, it just doesn't feel exciting not to show how the killer had killed Kaitou. And to think Irisu went out of her way to make this request of you guys... Since you guys are interested in mystery and all that, right? No offense guys, but I think I've found a way to spice up the movie, myself."

Like I said, you've got it all wrong. We're the Classics Club, not the Detective Fiction Studies Club... Anyway, if we end up not being able to solve this, then it would clear up the misunderstanding.

Nakajou started to become more passionate in his speech.

"The script contained a vital element - a sealed room. Kaitou died in a room with no other exits present. So the problem would be: how did the killer kill him?

"The answer is simple: The killer entered through the only entrance available to him."

Raising her brow, Ibara asked, "How?"

Nakajou laughed.

"Don't be so dense. He came in through the window, of course."

... The window?

I recalled the movie we saw yesterday. Only fragments of the movie still remained in my head. Though the scene which Nakajou mentioned was dramatic in itself, I couldn't even recall the layout of the scene of the crime.

Left with no other choice, I spoke.

"Satoshi, gimme the map."

Looking delighted, he saluted.

"Yessir! Hang on just a moment,"

And stuck his hand into his drawstring bag to take out a piece of paper - a rough drawing of the theatre map.

Based on the story, Kaitou would have died in the Right Stage area. The other characters would have entered via the corridor on the right hand side. I also remember someone running back to get the other master key to open the door. So from the perspective of the people in the right corridor, the Right Stage was a sealed room.

Afterwards, Katsuda tried to enter the Left Stage via the backstage, believing that the Right Stage was accessible from the left corridor via that way. Yet he found the way was boarded shut, if I remember correctly.

.....

To begin with, it was strange for Nakajou to call this a sealed room.

It cannot be called a sealed room in the purest sense, as no one can enter or exit a sealed room to do any killing. While it was hard to see from the movie visual, things become clearer with the map. Was there not another exit besides the window?

I pointed to the door leading to the main hall and asked, "What about this entrance?"

Nakajou quickly replied, "Can't be opened."

"......?"

"The door's tightly bolted with nails, so I don't think there's anything there."

I was dumbfounded. I then noticed Ibara looking distasteful, perhaps she was showing that expression to me. Hey, it's not my fault that no one told me anything about that entrance!

Irisu promised yesterday that Hongou's script would give the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery. Yet if I recall, the filming division was probably not informed about the filming of any vital clues. So they weren't told anything... As I felt exhausted, Satoshi smiled while promptly putting a cross over the entrance leading to the hall.

Anyway, with the hall entrance out of the question, that leaves just four exits for the sealed room. The doors and windows of the Right Stage and Left Stage. The doors for both rooms are blocked, so that leaves the windows.

"When you said window... which one were you referring to?"

Nakajou snorted at Ibara's question.

"This one, of course."

"The Right Stage window, right? But why is that?"

"It's a no-brainer, since the Left Stage window is blocked by a costume cabinet."

So that's why. Satoshi continued to smile as he crossed out the Left Stage window as well.

It's a waste of effort for us to continue at this pace. As an energy-saver, I dislike such meaningless waste of so much effort, so I put together everything and asked, "Sempai, there are too many unclear factors from the movie itself. Of course, this may have something to do with the quality of the screen itself. So could you please tell us if there are other rooms besides the two which we've discussed which are also inaccessible? It doesn't matter if they're sealed rooms or not."

"That so? Lemme think,"

Nakajou began to think a bit upon being asked.

"...Ah, yes, the inner control room on the left corridor could not be entered, as the doorknob was broken and we couldn't insert the key... And all the rooms facing North, that is, all the rooms besides the left corridor on the map, have their windows boarded up by wood in order to block out the snow during the winter, so they can't be removed."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yeah, that's all."

Nakajou asserted clearly.

While I was still suspicious, credibility was a valuable thing, after all, so I guess I'll have to trust him on this. It was at this moment when Chitanda, who had been quiet all this time, asked, "Does Hongou-san know about these facts as well? Since she didn't go with the filming crew..."

She's right, that is indeed important. If Hongou wrote her script based only on her knowledge of the map without knowing the conditions of the scene itself, she may end up intending one of those inaccessible routes as an exit.

Nakajou's reply quelled those worries straight away.

"Once Narakubo was chosen as the setting with Hongou as the writer, she went there once herself to have a look."

"When was that?"

"Hmm, she probably went in June... no, in the end of May."

"Sorry for interrupting you. Please do continue."

Nakajou nodded and resumed what he was saying, which was the main topic.

"In other words, the killer entered and exited via the window in the Right Stage. In which case, we would be able to shoot the scene where Kaitou's murder would take place while the door was locked. How about that?"

How about what?

You mean the part where the killer doesn't enter through the door but through the window?

"Oh, I see!"

Chitanda was the only one slapping her knees in realization.

I couldn't bring myself to sing a different tune to Nakajou, who was getting passionate. In such moments, I would count on Ibara to do that for me instead.

"But Nakajou-sempai, it wouldn't be a good mystery if that was the case."

While Nakajou didn't express any disappointment at being told off so directly like that, he lowered his voice considerably.

"You may see it like that and think there must be some other route. Besides... ah yes, you guys probably don't know Hongou well. She's not exactly a pro in mystery stories, so she may be employing some other wondrous technique instead."

Saying we don't really know Hongou was hardly a convincing way to persuade us. This... I was intending to just keep quiet and see what he had to say, but I couldn't help but be driven by the mood and said, "So, Sempai, is it possible to identify the killer then?"

"Identify?"

"If Hongou-sempai were employing such a technique, is it possible to deduce who the killer is?"

Nakajou didn't seem to be prepared for such a question, as he crossed his arms and went into thinking. Feeling emboldened, Ibara went for the kill.

"Besides, after the scene where everyone else entered the scene of crime, didn't the camera show the window as well?"

"Yeah."

"Yet if we see that scene, the window ought to have clearly shown traces of someone crawling through it. Based on your theory, this would be impossible."

Outside the window of the scene of crime...

Now I remember, there was a scene showing a thick layer of wild grass right up to a person's height outside the window. I see. If someone had crawled through the window, the grass would have shown signs of being cut and bent.

As Nakajou looked kind of confused, Ibara had to explain it further for him. Though Nakajou was unyielding.

"That wouldn't be a problem."

Really?

I took over Ibara's place upon hearing his rebuttal.

"How so? We thought it was pretty obvious."

"It may be that Hongou had mentioned it in her notebook but had forgotten to include it in the script."

"...If that's the case, then it's all over. What Ibara was saying is that no traces of the killer could be found, and you're saying this was due to Hongou's carelessness. Isn't that stretching it a bit too far?"

Nakajou groaned.

Yet he was surprisingly stubborn. He lifted his head as though thinking of something and raised his voice and said, "That's it, the grass!"

"...What about the grass?"

With his confidence back, he spoke with a bluster, "When you said the window could not be used, it was because the grass outside showed no traces of being cut or twisted, right?"

Ibara nodded cautiously.

"Then you must have been mistaken. As I said before, Hongou went to Narakubo in May. The grass was probably not yet fully grown then, so Hongou must have intended for the window to be usable when she saw it."

Oh Satoshi could be heard exclaiming in wonder. If there was anyone that Nakajou could get along with, it was probably Satoshi, as he'd probably say something like "That's the first sensible thing you've said all day". Ibara felt like responding, but couldn't find the words to. I laughed within my heart and thought, *He's pretty good.* To take into consideration the time of Hongou's visit to deduce that she may have intended for the killer to escape via the window, but then have the route end up being unusable during the time of filming.

He may be good, however...

Seeing as we remained silent and seemingly convinced, Nakajou pressed on.

"So, in our next filming, we'll just need to trim the grass and re-do the scene where the body was found. Now why didn't I realize this sooner? We can do this!"

From an outsider's perspective, Nakajou seemed to be soaring... I decided not to rebut him, as it would be a waste of energy.

Seeing that the conversation was over, Chitanda smiled to Nakajou and said, "Thank you for letting us hear your theory. We should be able to give Irisu-san a proper review of it."

Nakajou gave a satisfied nod. He looked so excited as though he was ready to write a script himself right away.

A few minutes later, we were in the Geology Room.

Grr... Ibara made an expression that doesn't need much description.

"Are we fine with that? Is that even going to work?"

It seemed that Nakajou's rebuttal had caught her unawares. It was hard to convince with that technique, or anything to suit that technique. That said, Nakajou's reasoning concerning the grass did make sense. For Ibara, this sealing off of the remaining hole in Nakajou's argument got her very frustrated.

"Well, physically it is possible,"

Satoshi too sounded unsatisfied as he whispered.

As for Chitanda,

"....."

She'd been gazing at me intermittently for some time now. As it was bothering me, I called out to her.

"What is it, Chitanda?"

"Ah, yes,"

Chitanda looked uncertain at first, but decided to say it.

"Oreki-san, do you think Hongou-san's true intention was what Nakajou-san described?"

"...Before I answer that, what do you think of it yourself?"

Upon returning that question to her, she seemed hesitant to speak. It was quite rare to see someone whose attitude and feelings are so easy to read. While her composure didn't dramatically collapse, her mouth and eyes were doing all the talking for her. And so I said to her, "You don't like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it! But... I find it unconvincing."

Isn't that another way of saying you don't like it?

Nakajou's attitude was, how should I put it, imposing. He was insistent in maintaining his own viewpoint and was unwilling to yield, as well as sealing off any chance for us to rebut it. No matter how passionate he may be, if his argument was unconvincing, then it was unconvincing. If we didn't feel that like we liked it, then we couldn't like it.

While I had no intention of imitating Nakajou, I still crossed my arms and said, "Well, it's not impossible. Though Nakajou's theory probably won't

stand. Perhaps this would explain why we felt subconsciously that it was so out of place."

Instead of Chitanda, the first person to react to that was Ibara, as she snarled, "Theory won't stand? Aren't you contradicting yourself!?"

She pressed me for an answer. Was she that desperate to overturn Nakajou's theory?

I made a gesture to Satoshi. Without even asking, he understood what I meant right away and tossed the map over to me. I laid it flat open on the table so that the girls could see.

I then spoke in a regular tone.

"While Nakajou's theory is simple, upon seeing the movie you'll find that it's quite silly. The reason is simple, as physically it's difficult to execute. Ibara, if you had said it was physically impossible, he would not have been able to say anything."

Her sour look confirmed what I said.

On the other hand, Chitanda, who was now overflowing with interest, leaned forward toward me, causing me to withdraw my chair backwards a bit.

"So you mean it's impossible from other places?"

"I won't go so far as to say it's impossible... Do you remember what Ibara asked Nakajou? About whether Hongou ever mentioned employing any filming trick."

Chitanda nodded clearly.

"Yes, I remember. She asked 'Was it ever mentioned whether this filming trick is a physical one or a psychological one?'"

"Exactly. In other words, if this could all be solved physically, then there would be no need of any psychological trick."

Satoshi suddenly laughed upon hearing that.

"Hahaha, what a roundabout way to put it, Houtarou. As expected from the 'Designated Detective'!"

A mean fellow he was, despite him already knowing I had no wish to play such a role. Though it was indeed a roundabout way of saying it. I reflected upon that and said it directly this time, "In other words, if we stand in the killer's shoes, we'll realize there's no way we could use the window."

I pointed to the scene of crime on the map, or to be precise, the window.

"For anyone amongst the cast to enter via that window, they would have to do so from outside the theatre. However...

It's not possible for someone to sneak off in broad daylight after splitting off from the others in the theatre. You only need to see to understand, no matter who it was that headed towards the scene of crime, they would have to enter someone else's field of vision while doing so. Not to mention they would be making footsteps that could be heard. I wouldn't take such a risk."

"Hmm,"

Satoshi rubbed his chin.

"I see. If I had wanted to kill someone practically, I wouldn't expose myself in the presence of so many people, thus making Nakajou's proposal unworkable. It may work at night, but the scene was during the day. Physically it would be stretching it a bit too far."

"Well, that's the gist of it."

As I replied, Chitanda sighed.

"I understand now. I think the reason why Nakajou-san's theory couldn't work was because he confused the scene we saw in the movie with how he has imagined it, which he based his theory on. I find it strange that he would conclude the killer sneaked in via an alternate exit just because someone else might have been inside the room with Kaitou."

That said, someone was still looking very unsatisfied. It was none other than Ibara.

"It may be true that what Oreki said is right, but we don't know whether Hongou-sempai herself realizes this."

She had a point. If we could just ask Hongou, everything would be solved... But we couldn't do that, or we wouldn't be here trying to use our wits. Still, I couldn't leave that question unanswered.

"We have no way of knowing how much Hongou knows, but we could figure it out indirectly,"

It was at this moment a guest arrived at the Geology Room. It was our "Guide" Eba, who stood just outside the door with no intention of entering.

"So what is your conclusion?"

Satoshi answered with a sarcastic smile, "We came up with something,"

"In other words?"

"We have decided to reject Nakajou-sempai's proposal"

While Eba muttered "I see" without looking too bothered, Chitanda bowed her head deeply.

"We're sorry."

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault... Then I shall lead you to meet the second person tomorrow."

Tomorrow? We're doing this tomorrow as well? ...What about my summer vacation?

After asking what she wanted to ask and hearing what she wanted to hear, Eba promptly left. I called out to that back of hers, to which she stopped and turned around in puzzlement.

"Yes?"

Her response somehow felt cold. I ignored that and asked, "I wonder if it's possible if we could have a look at the script? The actual screenplay used for the filming."

Eba looked at me as though evaluating something and said, "The script is what you have seen in the movie. Do you really need that?"

"Yes. Well... we need to understand how much attention Hongou-sempai has put into her script."

She gave a small nod and said it would be done.

Afterwards, though we continued talking about Nakajou, the topic gradually drifted away from the solving of the case itself. We ended up talking non-stop about our impressions of Nakajou and his eagerness, with the outcome of today's observation taking a backseat.

If you ask me what my impression of him was, I would say Irisu's quote "only those with the necessary skills can do the job required" fits him just right.

3 - The Invisible Intrusion

The next day.

As I was rather reluctant to take action the previous day, I received a call from Chitanda early that morning. It was pretty much an order from our club president asking me to come no matter what. As I had no good reason to resist such a gently worded request, I ended up heading to school that day as well. Well, it's not practical to jump off a ship in the middle of its voyage, and I had no intention to.

As I exited my house, I noticed an international letter had been delivered to our letterbox. As it was addressed to my old man instead of me, I didn't bother to open it. I didn't even need to see to guess who the sender was: Oreki Tomoe, my older sister.

My sis was not content with just staying in the country, but desired to wander around the world. She should be somewhere in Eastern Europe by now. Time and again my sis has got me involved in all sorts of bothersome things. Though those bothersome things are on a completely different meta-level from the type that Chitanda gets me involved in. But as the letter this time was not addressed to me, this probably means I'm more swayed by the frank and honest Chitanda than by my sis, which isn't a bad thing.

...Or maybe not.

Anyway, we now come to the Geology Room.

We didn't particularly do anything prior to Eba's arrival. As per usual, I took a seat in the shade and started reading my paperback novel. Just because I watched a mystery movie didn't mean I would go out of my way to buy a mystery novel. It was just a normal novel bought from a regular bookstore.

Opposite me was Chitanda, who stood by the window, unbothered by the scorching summer sun while looking at the grounds below. She must have a resistance to heat, as she doesn't seem to be tanned at all despite standing under the sun for so long... She just stood there staring at the grounds below, or to be more precise, she may have found something to meddle in amongst the people preparing for the Cultural Festival. But it was just her curious eyes sparkling, meaning she too was bored.

Ibara, on the other hand, was far from bored. As the real person responsible for the compilation of the "Hyouka" anthology, she was busy writing notes about it this time as well. A while ago I asked her what she was writing when all that's left is just to publish the manuscript. She gave me a terrifying stare and said, "If the manuscript could be sent to be published right away, there wouldn't be any need to edit it!"

Well, keep up the good work then.

As for Satoshi, he was reading a paperback novel just like me. As his hands were covering the book cover, I had no idea what he was reading. Though smiling was his default expression, he doesn't do it when he's reading. Having said that, it was strange to see such an expressionless Satoshi for once.

As I was thinking that, his expression gradually returned to normal. Placing down his book, he lifted up his face and looked around.

"Say, how many detective novels have you guys ever read before?"

Ibara stopped writing upon hearing that question and turned her head around.

"Fuku-chan, what are you trying to say?"

"You know, after listening to Nakajou-sempai yesterday, it got me thinking. Though his method of deduction was quite like those seen in detective novels, it was still way off the mark. So I thought maybe I should read a few more detective novels to help us deduce this better."

Hmm. Indeed, while Nakajou's reasoning sounded innovative at first, after thinking about it overnight, it was no different from your average detective show on TV. It was not rare for Satoshi to make such connections in the strangest places.

"Hmm, for me I've only read a normal amount of detective novels,"

"So how normal is your amount anyway? That's why I'm asking," Satoshi said and smiled, to which Ibara also smiled bitterly.

"Well, for me, hmm, normal would mean having read Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen, I guess."

Was that normal? Though I do know the authors' names at least... Satoshi tilted his head as well.

"Rather than normal, that amount of reading should be considered expert. Those are more like classics befitting of the Classics Club, aren't they? ...Is that all? What about Japanese authors?"

"Though there are many of them, it's not like I read much. I read a few railroad mysteries, but that's about it. While I may be somewhat interested in mystery novels, there are many authors whose works I can't seem to enjoy."

Well, it seems the more you read the more you're familiar with them, aren't you? You were the one who showed interest when you heard Class 2-F was making a mystery movie. I suppose amongst the four of us, Ibara was the most proficient in detective fiction.

"What about you, Houtarou?"

I closed the book I was reading and replied, "I don't read those,"

"Are you especially conscious about not reading detective stories in particular? You haven't got much honour in your reading methods, you know?"

Oh, leave me alone.

"I've read a few paperbacks with yellow book covers like this one, that's all."

Without being serious, I gave him a suitable response.

"Ahh... So that means, only Japanese authors, huh? You're kinda rigid, you know?"

He gave me an instant reply. It seemed like this answered his question well enough. As always, Satoshi possesses a wide range of knowledge for no particular reason.

Satoshi now turned to Chitanda, who shook her head slowly,

"I don't read any of those."

"Eh?"

He sounded surprised. Though it was also surprising for me as well, as based on her tendency to seek out an answer for every riddle she encounters, I would expect her to be pretty interested in detective fiction. Satoshi tried to make sure of that.

"Not a single one?"

"I think I'm probably not that interested in mystery novels after reading some. And it's been many years since I've touched one."

Rather than not having read any detective novels, she ended up rejecting them after reading them. To think that our lady would be weak at detective novels despite encountering situations not unlike those seen in detective novels. Sounds pretty contradicting. That would be like a businessman who dislikes reading business novels. But thinking carefully, that isn't entirely strange.

"Really? But Chi-chan, weren't you enjoying it yourself when we were watching the Class 2-F mystery movie?"

Chitanda smiled gently.

"I was just happy that Irisu-san had invited us to show us something she and her friends had made... It's not like I particularly enjoy watching mystery movies."

I see, that makes sense.

Well, that means there's just one person left. Everyone must be included, after all. I asked Satoshi, who looked as though he had understood everything and was nodding eagerly, "So, what about you?"

"Me?"

"I presume you've read all the detective novels around the world, past and present?" I asked jokingly, to which Satoshi flatly denied, "No, I haven't."

Hmm?

Ibara began to smile from the tip of her lips.

"Oh, I know what Fuku-chan likes to read,"

Satoshi hung his head in embarrassment. It would seem Chitanda's interest was piqued.

"Eh? So what is it? Fukube-san, it's not a secret, is it?"

In other words, if it's a secret, Chitanda would definitely not pursue it any further. I know this based on experience, that our lady does have some restraint on her curiosity.

Meanwhile, Satoshi was at a loss for words.

"Well, I..."

What? Just say it, already.

As I thought that, Ibara quickly spilled the beans.

"Fuku-chan's an avid Sherlockian!"

...Ah, I get it.

A Sherlockian is a fan who is passionate about Sherlock Holmes. While I'm not too sure of the details, I've heard these people have actually done research into the fate of the bulldog raised by Holmes' partner. It was a serious interest that was not to be treated as mere child's play or entertainment. Though for Satoshi, it was probably a bit of both.

"What's a Sherlockian?"

"Um, you see,"

As Ibara was trying to explain to an oblivious Chitanda, Satoshi corrected her quietly.

"An avid fan is not called a Sherlockian, it's Holmesian..."

What's the difference anyway?

Just as we were teasing Satoshi, Eba had arrived at the doorway and bowed her head courteously as usual.

"I'm sorry to inform you that we could not secure an empty classroom today, so we would request that today's meeting take place at the classroom for Class 2-F, if it would not trouble you too much, as it might be a bit messy."

I don't see why she finds the need to apologize for that.

"Well then, let's head to Round Two of our Deduction Meeting then,"

Upon hearing Satoshi's intentionally cheerful voice, we proceeded to exit the classroom. Though I think it's a bit too much to call it a Deduction Meeting.

Activities from the various clubs were just as lively today, as music combining instruments and people singing were heard. The tune sounded familiar. It turned out to be the theme song of Mito Komon. It sounded elegant, but yet not quite.

As we were walking, Eba gave us a briefing in advance.

"The person you'll be meeting today is Haba Tomohiro, of the props division."

I looked at Satoshi, who shook his head. It would seem this Haba was hardly famous either. Yesterday it was the filming division, so today it's the props division, huh? We seem to be going on a trend here. Eba continued solemnly, "Though he wasn't assigned any specific role to begin with, he had decided to barge... actively involve himself in all sorts of fine details. Is there anything else you would like to ask?"

Ibara, noticing something specific, asked, "Umm, if this Haba-sempai was barging... actively involving himself in the making of the movie, why wasn't he assigned an acting role?"

Heh, I see. Indeed, such a person should have been standing in front of a camera. Eba turned to face Ibara and nodded.

"He was passed over."

"That means,"

"The roles were decided by a count of hands. He didn't get enough votes."

Now I get it. I finally spoke.

"And why are we meeting this person?"

In other words: *Would someone who decides to barge... actively involve himself in a project accept the opinion of us outsiders?* Eba showed an unusually troubled expression.

"I too have doubts about his selection... but it was Irisu that chose him, so she must have her reasons. If you ask me, it probably has something to do with him being the most proficient in mystery fiction amongst the entire crew. At least that's what he claims, himself."

As I could find no response, I decided to force a smile to her.

Still, Satoshi had emphasized "the Empress" Irisu being good at making people do her errands skillfully. If he was correct, then it would be as Eba has said, that Irisu does have her reasons for picking Haba. To begin with, this was just one of the matters that Irisu had gotten us involved in, so it's not like we hadn't suspected such a ploy from her. As I was thinking, Satoshi showed some dissatisfaction.

"Just where on earth has Irisu-sempai gone? She has totally not shown herself since."

Come to think of it, he's right. We haven't seen her since the day before yesterday. Though Eba answered our question right away.

"She said she would be looking for a replacement screenwriter while you figure out the 'correct deduction'. She's also having some difficulty on her end."

We came upon the corridor linking the Special Block with the General Block.

Before we arrived at the Class 2-F classroom, Chitanda opened her mouth gently.

"Eba-san,"

"Yes?"

"Are you close to Hongou-san?"

Eba looked briefly confused. Though she didn't look worried, I could feel she was struggling to find the right words to answer.

"...Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious," Chitanda smiled at Eba and said, "I couldn't stop thinking about what the person who wrote the script was like. She seemed like a very serious person,"

We now arrived before the Class 2-F classroom. Eba stopped her footsteps, turned around, and slowly said, "Hongou is a good friend of mine. She's sincere, attentive, and has a stubbornly strong sense of responsibility, as well as being kind and tender. But, is there something you would learn from me telling you this? ...Anyway, Haba is expecting you inside."

She then turned her back towards us and left without even introducing us to Haba.

It was just as Eba had described it—the Class 2-F classroom was quite untidy. There were the rucksacks seen in the movie as well as their yet to be shown contents lying everywhere. On the blackboard were some messy notes that seemed to be the filming schedule, with a long sentence written across the top in yellow chalk that read "Next Sunday = Absolute Ultimate Deadline!" The tables and chairs too were in disarray, and for the first time I realized how much of a crisis this class was facing with their project. As I wondered whether this was also part of Irisu's schemes in having us meet Haba here, we entered the messy classroom.

In the corner of the classroom where the sun didn't shine stood a male student. Bespectacled, he was rather skinny for his size. Upon seeing us, he raised his hands in a melodramatic way and said, "So you're the observers sent by Irisu. Pleased to meet you, my name is Haba Tomohiro."

Like yesterday, Chitanda once again introduced us starting with herself. Haba repeated our names many times as though trying to memorize them before gesturing us to take our seats.

While I have no idea how Haba would have behaved normally, he seemed to be in a good mood today. As he watched us take our seats with a satisfied expression, he nodded.

"I hear you guys are quite good with mysteries, at least compared to our class, where there's hardly anyone that's good with them."

It would seem the people of Class 2-F have been misinformed. Even Chitanda had noticed this and stated, "We're with the Classics Club."

Haba's eyes widened.

"Ah yes, the Classics Club. So you must be familiar with all the books from the Golden Age, then? Wow."

He seemed to be even more mistaken than before. Then again, as the Classics Club was a club engaged in unknown activities, it's not surprising that it would be mistaken as a club that is proficient with mystery novels.

As Haba was still muttering "Wow", he took out a piece of A4 sized paper and placed it on the table before him. It was the map of the theatre seen in the movie. On it were written the formal names for each room as well as the positions of all the windows, and an unintelligible designer name called "Nakamura Aoi" or something like that. Even the blocked passageway was well-marked.

Satoshi raised his voice without even thinking.

"Sempai, what is this!?"

"Hmm? Were you not shown this before?"

Without saying a word, Satoshi took out his own self-drawn map.

Haba groaned, "...This makes things easier,"

"Umm, where'd you get this map?" asked Ibara, to which Haba replied, "This building was built by the Furuoka Town government, after all, so I only needed to look it up in their town hall. The deduction can only be done with this map,"

He then smiled.

On Haba's map were marked the position of the body, as well as where everyone else was scattered before. Him being this enthusiastic wasn't a bad thing, as I too would want to know such information.

Haba looked even more excited as he went on, "Still, for a mystery writer or reader, a mystery written by an amateur like Hongou wouldn't be enough to satisfy them,"

He sounded pretty confident. Chitanda asked, "Was Hongou-san not proficient with mystery stories?"

"Yup. She had never read any before the making of this movie."

"But I heard she did do some research,"

Haba raised the corners of his lips to form a smile.

"They're all old stories. Look over there, those are the things she went through overnight,"

He pointed to a corner of the classroom with his chin, revealing numerous volumes of books piled up together. A glance at them showed they were all paperbacks. Chitanda leaned over and asked, "Umm, would you mind if we had a look at those?"

Haba looked troubled at Chitanda's interest being directed to such unexpected places. I too was wondering what she was up to, though our lady's curiosity was easy to read. Without waiting for a reply, she got up out of her seat and went to pick up a book.

Looking at the mountain of books beside the map, Satoshi said in an intrigued voice, "Ahh, the Nobahara translated version... And it's the new edition as well."

They were the Sherlock Holmes stories that we were just talking about a while ago. The covers were well embossed with a handwriting-like font

printed on a white shiny paper, enticing the reader to start reading the Sherlock Holmes stories right away upon buying. Ibara gazed at the books and said coldly, "So she only studied Holmes as research?"

Haba replied, "Yup. That's why I said she's an amateur."

...So people who read Holmes are only amateurs, huh? Quite a bold statement he's making here. And he's saying it in the presence of Satoshi, a Sherlockian (though he prefers to call himself a Holmesian). Yet Satoshi smiled without seeming too bothered.

"Well, I get that a lot."

Hmm.

Taking the first book from the top of the mountain of books, Chitanda began flipping through the pages. We really should be getting back on topic... I had no idea whether she noticed my anxiety or not; most probably not. Chitanda's hand stopped at one of the pages.

"Oh,"

"What is it?"

"There are some strange markings in here. Look,"

She showed me the page she was on, and I instantly knew it was the Table of Contents without even reading the words. Indeed, there were markings before the title of each short story. Though I did not think of those markings as "strange" as Chitanda had.

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

◯ A Scandal in Bohemia
△ The Adventure of the Red Headed League
X A Case of Identity
△ The Boscombe Valley Mystery
X The Five Orange Pips
◎ The Man with the Twisted Lip
◯ The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle
X The Adventure of the Speckled Band
X The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor
△ The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

"And this one as well,"

The Case-Book of Sherlock Homes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

◯ The Adventure of the Illustrious Client
◎ The Adventure of the Blanched Sailor
△ The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone
X The Adventure of the Three Gables
◯ The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire
◎ The Adventure of the Three Garridebs
△ The Problem of Thor Bridge
△ The Adventure of the Creeping Man

△ The Adventure of the Lion's Mane
X The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

Upon seeing those, I quickly dispelled Chitanda's concerns.

"What's so strange about those? They're probably just marking notes used by Hongou."

"Is that... so?"

Though she didn't seem too convinced, she decided to let the matter rest for now. During this time, Satoshi seemed to be muttering something, as I was about to ask him, he met my gaze and gave me a gesture that said he wouldn't know either, and turned his attention back to the map.

"Let's leave that aside,"

Tapping his fingers on the table, Haba spoke.

"Rather than that, let's begin with the deduction,"

Sigh. Seemed like he couldn't wait to start with his own deductions already. Then again, I too wanted to hurry up and get this over and done with. So I grabbed Chitanda's hand to stop her from picking up another book, and she only then realized that Haba was waiting, and reluctantly placed it back on the mountain-like pile.

"I'm sorry. Please do begin."

Haba gave a nod, and took a ballpen out of his chest pocket. Probably an item needed in order for the lecture to proceed, so pay attention, folks.

"All right. The way I see it, this mystery isn't that difficult. In fact, it could be classified as an easy one."

He paused to watch our reactions. I didn't give any, by the way, and I had no idea what reactions the others were giving either.

"First, this murder was unpremeditated, or rather, it was only half-premeditated. So it's not one of those 'Just as planned' cases. It just so happens that the conditions were right for the killer to carry out his plans. Are you following me?"

Not a bad opening speech. No, to be honest, that's not exactly what I was thinking. I see, now that he mentions it, no matter what technique the movie employs, it won't be able to portray an elaborate plan without it not making sense. As for the reason,

"...What's the reason for that?"

Chitanda just asked something incredible. Haba looked rather displeased that he was interrupted so soon after starting, but quickly replied with a cheerful expression, "The reason being that if everything was planned, Kaitou would be asked to go to the right side of the theatre. Instead, what we saw was that he picked the key at random and went off to that side on his own. So I believe the killer merely made good use of this condition. Well, it shouldn't be too far from the truth, since there are many such examples in murder mysteries."

Though there are many instances of a trickster making a person pick the exact card that he wants to be picked, it didn't seem to be the case this time. So Haba's making sense so far.

Haba continued by pointing his ballpen at the Right Stage on the map, the room marked "body found".

"As you all know, this is a sealed room murder. The only exits available at the scene are here, here, and here. Two of them are sealed off and unusable, while the other was locked when the body was found. There are also two windows, with one sealed off while the other was covered by

tall grass on the outside, which showed no signs of anyone treading through it. In other words, Kaitou's killer did not escape via normal means,"

He'd now reached the point where Nakajou had stopped, to which he smiled.

"That said, the killer was no longer in the room after Kaitou was killed, a typical sealed room situation. While you may not have thought of this before, a sealed room situation is usually established the moment the body is found. Or to be more precise, when everyone else has entered the room and found the body. Now, how is this established? One only has to think along the lines of detective fiction writers past and present.

"Let's start with the simplest method. The killer may choose to take the master key and use it to enter the scene of crime, and then return the master key to where it was.

"But this is totally uninteresting. There would be an uproar if that was actually the case. Not even an amateur like Hongou would choose such a method. So let's have a look at the facts.

"The keys were found in the theatre office. In order to get to the office, one has to go past the lobby. And anyone passing through the lobby would be seen by Sugimura in the second floor equipment room, or would at least attract his attention. So if the killer had wanted to get the master key, he would have had to hope that he didn't get seen by Sugimura. It just doesn't make sense for a killer to take such a risk.

"Now, what if it were Sugimura that was the one to take the key? That wouldn't do either, as he too would have to risk being seen by Senoue, Katsuda and Yamanishi."

Hmm, he's quite prudent with his deductions, isn't he? Now if only he could do the same with his attitude.

"Now, this fact that the lobby cannot be entered without being watched is quite important, as it means not only the Right Stage, but the entire corridor cannot be entered by the killer from the lobby. Do you now know the meaning behind this?" he asked as he lifted his face from the map. Like a teacher waiting for a student to answer his questions, he looked at us one by one.

...*Oh!* Ibara noticed his gaze meeting hers.

After a brief silence, she gave a short reply.

"The killer used some sort of physical trick?"

A momentary glimpse of disappointment was shown on Haba's face.

Though he soon returned to his upbeat manner.

"Exactly."

What's his problem anyway? Was he getting upset about someone guessing his questions correctly? He seemed rather lacking in prudence and blunt about it.

"Indeed, if the killer used some sort of string to lock the door from outside the room. But that doesn't make sense either. As the killer would not be able to come out of the right corridor, which is effectively a second 'outer sealed room'. In other words, it was not possible to create a sealed room from the outside.

"One may argue that this sealed room is made by none other than the victim himself. Perhaps the victim wasn't killed instantly, and decided to lock himself inside to run away from the killer, and ended up dying in there. But that doesn't change the fact that this 'outer sealed room' still exists.

"Then, what other possibilities are there available? These include the killer not being present when the victim was killed, or the murder still taking place when the victim was found. To put it simply, the victim was killed by some mechanics, or he was quickly killed without anyone else knowing. Do you get it now?"

Yeah, I get it.

Though there were also people who did not get it, especially Chitanda, who had hardly read any detective fiction. She raised her hands apologetically.

"Umm, excuse me, but could you please elaborate further?"

Haba seemed pretty pleased with Chitanda's request, and nodded as he began explaining cheerfully, "Mechanics basically means the room was rigged with some sort of booby trap, which ended up killing Kaitou. For example, it could be a bow gun or poisoned needle. Being quickly killed without anyone else knowing means Kaitou was still alive the moment the door was unlocked, and the murder took place discreetly during this brief moment when everyone went to confirm whether Kaitou was dead or not."

Chitanda let out an unsavoury gasp.

"Anyway, these two possibilities are rejected as well as they have the same flaw, do you know what that is?"

Haba turned to Ibara as though goading her to respond. Ibara raised her brows indicating she knew what he was up to. She didn't need to answer but still decided to.

"Yes, it's the condition of the body, right?"

"...Exactly. It is indeed interesting to speak with someone who gets it."

Though he was being unreasonable, I sort of got what he was doing, and I laughed in my thoughts. Haba cleared his throat and said, "The condition of the body, in order words, the theory that Kaitou could have had his arm severed and been killed by a machine or killed quickly upon the room being entered is rejected. First, for such a machine to kill him with such force, it would have been discovered right away. Second, as a strong force would be needed to kill him, killing him discreetly under everyone's noses was just not possible.

"This means...

"It is difficult for the sealed room created by Hongou to be entered from the front."

Haba finished his explanation, sat further back into his chair and took a breath. He soon resumed his extremely confident attitude and turned to me.

"You, Oreki-kun, was it? What do you think of this deduction?"

At that moment, I had really wanted to tell him, *It was great, can we go now?* But I get the feeling Haba is purposely saving the best of his deduction for last. He probably had a standard answer prepared in advance no matter what I said. But as I remained silent, he made a forced smile, as though gesturing to me in an attempt to get the flow moving,*Hurry up and say you don't get it!*

As expected, he made a scoffing laugh and raised his voice.

"No, this won't do! But this isn't impossible, right?"

He then slowly stood up and walked toward one of the rucksacks seen in the movie, then stuck his hand inside the bag and carried it like that over to us.

"As you know, I'm with the props division. I'm responsible for buying the necessary equipment needed for the filming of the movie. It was we who made Kaitou's 'blood' as well as his 'severed arm'."

The object he pulled out from the bag was exactly what I expected it to be.

A rope.

"Hongou can be quite careless in her preparation. For example, though she intended there to be lots of blood to be used in that scene, the filming crew was in a panic when we found out our stock of fake blood was not enough. Still, she specifically requested us to get a rope. She told us as someone would be required to climb down it, so we would need a very sturdy rope. So I asked if a standard safety rope would do, and she was fine with it. Do you realize what she was intending to do with this?" he said while returning to his seat, placing the rope on the table. He puffed up his chest confidently as he continued, "Let me give you a hint. Despite her slender appearance, Kounosu is actually a member of the Hiking Club."

He took a glance at every one of us. Ibara probably gets it. Satoshi continued to maintain his smile while looking at his notebook, but he probably didn't get it. Chitanda simply looked puzzled, so she certainly did not get it.

In any case, seeing as we all said nothing, Haba spoke in a voice as though telling us an incredible secret.

"In other words, if the killer can't enter from the first floor, then he only needs to enter from the second floor. That is the remaining viable route. The right corridor on the second floor was occupied by Kounosu, and it was no coincidence that she was assigned there. If I had to guess, it's probably due to her being in the Hiking Club.

"Hongou's trick is actually quite simple: To have the killer climb down from the window on the second floor using a rope, kill Kaitou without anyone noticing, then return back up the same rope."

"Umm, so the killer enters the Right Stage from upstairs, right?"

"Well, duh. If the killer had entered from any other route, the locked door would serve no purpose... Now, I'm sure you all get it by now. As the movie hasn't got a title, if it's to have one, then it ought to be named 'The Invisible Intrusion'."

Haba puffed his chest as though declaring, *Now how's that?*

As though what he just said was the undeniable truth, he said, "Now, let me hear what you think of it."

He asked us what we think of it, huh? We exchanged glances with each other. Ibara's face looked as though she was prodding me to show him some; I decided to ignore her, I had no intention of wasting any unnecessary energy just to rebuke him as we did with Nakajou yesterday. While Nakajou was very passionate, Haba was extremely confident. I turned my head the other way and met Chitanda's gaze. I sensed what she wanted to say and gave her an approving nod.

Nodding back, she turned and said to Haba, "We think it's a wonderful deduction."

While Haba may have thought her response a matter of fact, she was merely saying it out of courtesy.

"Oh, you flatter me too much,"

He then turned to Ibara with a smile.

"What about you?"

Damn, he's trying to provoke her. Yet Ibara, despite feeling frustrated, decided to nod upon seeing Chitanda's response.

Haba seemed to have finished what he had wanted to say. Sensing the time had come, I proceeded to speak.

"It was a great deduction, Haba-sempai. We shall be able to provide Irisu-sempai with a proper review... Have a good day."

Haba nodded satisfactorily. I stood up upon finishing. We each bade him goodbye and moved to leave the Class 2-F classroom.

Before leaving, Chitanda looked at the Sherlock Holmes books on the chair and said, "Excuse me, Haba-san, but do you mind if we borrow these?"

Though it was a strange request, as Haba was in a good mood, he agreed.

"Those are Hongou's books. Make sure you return them as you have borrowed them,"

Don't freely lend out other people's belongings. I said within my thoughts.

Ibara and Satoshi too left the classroom. As I was about to close the door, I stuck my head back inside to ask something.

"Haba-sempai,"

"Hmm? Is there anything else?"

"No, it's nothing important. I was just wondering if you've seen the movie yet. I thought Kaitou-sempai's severed arm effect was done rather well."

Thereupon Haba shook his head and smiled bitterly.

"To be honest, I've yet to watch it myself."

That answer was good enough for me.

"Man, he pisses me off," Ibara said, the moment we returned to the Geology Room. As we could feel the seething anger within such a brief sentence, I had no intention of teasing her.

The only person capable of doing that would be Satoshi.

"What's wrong? You look as though you got struck dumb by Sempai's provocative attitude."

Ibara gently shook her head.

"Well, if you're talking about provocative people, I get provoked by you all the time,"

Her description was apt in a strange way. Though Satoshi was known to live his life without much fear, I'd never heard him being called provocative before. Because I would have thought that she would find Haba's in-your-face way of presenting himself annoying to say the least. Seeing as we didn't get what she meant, Ibara sighed and continued, "What I didn't like was the way he treated me like some idiot."

"Mayaka an idiot, huh?"

"Besides that... it's not just me, but all of us, even Hongou-sempai and the rest of Class 2-F were treated the same way. Just because I don't have a good reason to be angry doesn't mean I'm not."

Rather than being angry, she's feeling peeved because she couldn't find a good reason to be angry, huh?

To me, Haba was merely displaying his confidence, though to Ibara it was nothing but a show of arrogance, as she said Haba was looking down on everyone. Indeed, there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Perhaps they're actually one and the same thing even. Yet to even feel angry with that, I felt Ibara pretty much matched the description for the card "Justice" and smiled to myself in amusement.

"He even made fun of Sherlock Holmes! Aren't you mad about that, Fuku-chan?"

She sounded really forceful. Yet Satoshi merely shrugged his shoulders and took it quite well.

"Not really."

"Why!?"

"Well, it is indeed true that Sherlock Holmes is beginner level stuff for mystery readers. When I heard Hongou-sempai was doing some research into mystery fiction, the first thing I thought she would look into would be Sherlock Holmes. Weren't you thinking the same thing as well, Mayaka? So don't be so angry, okay?" he said while patting Ibara's shoulders. Rather than Haba's arrogant attitude, she was actually more pissed off by his disrespect of Sherlock Holmes... Well, seeing as Ibara looked at ease saying what she wanted to say, there was no need for me to intervene.

Now for the main problem; I shifted around on my seat and said, "So, what now? Do we submit Haba's proposal to Her Imperial Highness?"

Including Chitanda, who was looking at the Holmes book she opened, the other three all turned to look at me.

First was Satoshi, who said with some doubt remaining in his mind, "Well, why not? To be honest, his conclusion was hardly interesting, but he did

say Hongou-sempai had specifically asked for the use of a rope. Leaving the details aside, I think perhaps he's got it spot on."

Ibara followed, unexpectedly nodding in agreement, "I don't find any particular problems with it either... There are no contradictions in his deductions, nor any inconsistencies with the script. I'm not going to reject it for the sake of rejection alone."

The ayes have two votes now. What about the third vote?

As we looked at Chitanda, for some reason, she looked rather troubled. Unable to stay calm, she widened her eyes and opened her mouth, but was at a loss for words.

"What's wrong, Chitanda?"

"Eh... I, I just couldn't agree to it for some reason."

Hmm.

Ibara asked in a sociable way, which I could never do, "Chi-chan, how come?"

Chitanda looked even more troubled.

"Umm, well, I'm not sure of it myself. But, I just feel it's not Hongou-san's true intention... Ahh, I just can't accept this deduction. While it's different from the sense of disorientation felt from Nakajou's deduction yesterday, I just couldn't accept it!"

As long as we don't hear it from the author herself, if Chitanda didn't get it, then there was no way I could get it either. It would seem that Chitanda was against the deduction. Suddenly, Chitanda turned her eyes towards me like a wasp. S-stop looking me like that with those eyes!

"What about you, Oreki-san? Do you think that deduction is correct?"

Ugh. I never thought I would attract so much attention. And I was intending to say something carefree. I shifted on my seat and swung my legs about, and shook my head as dramatically as possible.

"No, I don't."

Ibara fired a response at me right away, "Why, Oreki!?"

...Those are some double standards from you. Feeling sad for her, I answered, "Because Haba's proposal is unworkable. If a murder were to really take place in such a theatre, such preparations might have worked. But it is impossible for that movie."

Satoshi urged me on with his usual smile.

"In other words?"

"In other words, it's contradictory to what we have seen in the movie. Leave the map aside and try to recall the movie we saw the day before yesterday. What do we see outside the window of the Right Stage?"

I'm quite amazed that even I was able to recall, considering I wasn't particularly paying attention when watching the movie. Upon suggesting to them to disregard the map, it wasn't hard for them to recall it either.

Satoshi led the way nodding.

"Ah yes, that window."

"Exactly. The building had fallen into disrepair for so many years, even the sturdy looking Katsuda-sempai had a hard time opening that window. I'm sure you all remember the creaking noise made as he struggled to push it open, showing it to be quite hard to open.

If they were to shoot a scene showing the killer entering via the window, then they would have had to arrange for Kounosu-sempai to climb down

from upstairs using a rope, and in order not to disturb the grass, she would have had to open the window while maintaining an awkward hanging position. That is quite difficult to accomplish, as opening such a window would take time, not to mention the sound it would make. And if it wasn't opened properly, the glass may even have shattered. Besides, what do you think Kaitou-sempai would be doing? Would he have just stood there and watched? Of course not.

"Had Hongou not visited the location herself when writing that script, then this method might have had no problem being adopted, considering she wouldn't have known about the window's condition. Haba's suggestion is based on the map alone without even watching the movie itself."

"Oh, so that was why you asked Haba-san whether he'd seen the movie!" Chitanda raised her voice as she exclaimed. She actually heard my exchange with Haba? I have never failed to be amazed by her extraordinary senses.

"Right. If he had seen the movie, then he would have known it was impossible to enter the room from upstairs.

"The truth is that Hongou had been to the site herself and wrote the script based on her observations. Nakajou said so. If Hongou had really intended for the window to be used as Haba had described it, and assuming that Irisu is right about Hongou being a meticulous person, then she would have requested the filming division to prepare for some lubricant to be used on the window at the crime scene. I do not believe she would have simply ignored such defects in the building.

"In short, I can't agree with Haba's deduction. How about it?"

I didn't even need to ask. I could tell Satoshi thought my explanation was appropriate, while Ibara gave an expression as though she didn't really want to agree.

"Well then," a voice behind me said, "This means you have not come to an agreement today either, right?"

As I turned around, I found Eba standing there without even realizing it.

She must be really looking forward to the solving of this mystery. Though she didn't show it as she said, "Then I look forward to guiding you to meet the third person tomorrow."

"Oh... Yes, thank you. We look forward to your assistance."

Chitanda bowed right after finishing. Eba shook her head, and added something else as though it were nothing important.

"But tomorrow will be the last day. If the problem is still not solved by the evening of the day after tomorrow, then the script will not be able to be made in time for the filming."

Today's Wednesday. I see, we're running on a tight schedule here.

As we felt a sense of unease, Eba relaxed her expression and bowed her head deeply.

"...It is I who should be looking forward to *your* assistance."

4 - Bloody Beast

The next day.

It was another fine day, with fine weather covering the entire country. A good day for leisurely activity. Watching a bit of TV for once in the morning, it showed people heading off to the sea and mountains. Ahh, tanned skin, smiling faces, that's what I call a vacation!

And here we were, huddling our desks in the corner of the classroom having a meeting.

Then again, I had no preference either way. In fact, having a meeting might even suit me better. If I had to be free, then I would prefer killing time in an air-conditioned cafe sipping away at a hot cup of coffee. On such an occasion, only black coffee with its bitter taste would suffice.

"Oreki, stop daydreaming! We're supposed to be thinking of a solution here!"

My consciousness returned to the meeting. Even without being told, we all knew the agenda today was the solution to the movie "Mystery (working title)". Since we were only discussing it, we weren't exactly going beyond our responsibilities as "observers". But then, I was merely listening silently, as it was just Satoshi summarizing the situation,

"...In other words, what Haba-sempai said was correct — the sealed room was rather rigid, as it's not easy breaking into a double sealed room. Especially the outer sealed room, which was practically shouting 'as though you can break in',"

The outer sealed room Satoshi was referring to was the second sealed room which Haba was mentioning yesterday. As the entrance to the right corridor was being watched by Sugimura, no one would be able to sneak inside perfectly without being seen.

Chitanda tilted her head and said timidly, "So it can't be broken into? But, how could you be so certain?"

"Well, you see, Chi-chan,"

Ibara took over the explanation.

"It's under the pretext that Haba-sempai's second sealed room exists. If that is to be broken into, then they must have filmed something about when and how it was broken into. If that's the case, then the cast could have treated this 30 seconds as a blind spot where they would show how the killer breaks in. But we've not seen anything of that sort in the movie. As the movie was very simple, there's just not enough room to insert anything extra."

"Oh, I see. So it was never mentioned whether the killer sneaked through during the brief moment Sugimura-san wasn't watching the hall, right?"

Ibara nodded and continued, "Besides, it's the same thing if it was Sugimura-sempai trying to escape from Senouchi-sempai and the others' lines of vision. That's why I hadn't thought Hongou-sempai would consider the possibility of a second sealed room. That was just Haba-sempai thinking too much. Instead, thinking from the premise of who had entered the right side corridor would have been better."

Give it up already, Ibara. Where's the fun if you have to do all the thinking? Though Ibara quickly gave a self-deprecating smile and waved her hand to dismiss what she just said.

"Nah, that probably won't work as well. Since they've already shot the part with Sugimura-sempai shown standing above the hall, which means he was watching the whole time."

Silence. The meeting had come to a deadlock.

Recognizing the stalemate, Chitanda suddenly spoke.

"By the way, I nearly forgot,"

She took something out of the bag she was carrying on her shoulder.

"Here, have some."

It was some sweets wrapped in small elegant boxes with English words written on them. It seemed they were whiskey bonbons.

"What's with these?"

Faced with the sudden appearance of such luxury, Ibara said that looking half-amazed. Chitanda smiled gently.

"These are samples for a new recipe. It was sent to us as a gift by the candy makers for the Bon Festival. Though we hardly eat many sweets, so..."

Upon opening the lids, each small box contained around 20 rather large whiskey bonbons.

"Since I got it as a gift, feel free to have them."

She handed one over to me. I removed the paper wrapping and put the chocolate in my mouth. I could smell a strong flavour of almond and whiskey as I bit it.

Chitanda asked, "How is it?"

"...It tastes strong."

To the point of getting drunk. I was thinking of having another one, seeing as she went out of her way to give them to us, but decided otherwise.

As each one of us got their share of candy, I began to do some thinking.

The biggest challenge this mystery posed was its limitation of information. As Ibara had put it, as it wasn't really filmed meticulously, there was hardly room to insert anything extra. To begin with, was it even possible to solve the mystery just by watching the movie? I really don't want to watch it again just to confirm. Besides, the movie never even showed the fact that the entrance to the hall and the north-facing windows were boarded up. Was it possible to film the rest of the scenes in time for the day after tomorrow (Yes! The day after tomorrow!) just by our own observations...

I thought from the perspective of the retired screenwriter Hongou Mayu, writing a mystery script despite having no prior knowledge of detective fiction, and working so hard on it that she got gastritis from being too stressed out. Eba was right in describing her as a sincere and attentive person. She has my sympathies though, as the people from the filming division were unable to get the script she worked so hard on. I wonder how she would feel if she were to hear people tell her "Can you really solve this just by watching the film?"

Well, I'll leave that aside for now.

"...Whoo."

A strange sigh was heard.

An amazing sight appeared before my eyes. I had two bonbon wrappers in front of me. Satoshi also had two, while Ibara had one. But was that six wrappers from bonbons that Chitanda had eaten? And she was in the process of unwrapping a seventh as we were watching. I frantically stopped her.

"I think that's enough for you. Since it's alcoholic, after all."

Upon being told this, Chitanda stared at the seventh bonbon on her palm, then looked at the wrapper beside it. Just when I was wondering what she would do next, she promptly put the bonbon into her mouth.

As she was quite indulging herself, she said, "Oh, I've eaten this much already. It's got some strange taste, so I felt curious and had more."

Eating more just because she was curious.....

"Chi-chan! Are you alright?"

Noticing how serious the situation was, Ibara called out to Chitanda, who merely responded with a smile.

"I'm fine, why do you ask?"

"But, you look strange."

"I'm fine, I'm fine... Fufufu..."

Umm, your laughing is way different from how you normally laugh.

As the appointed time had arrived, Eba came as usual and stood by the door with her emotionless expression, though this time she raised her eyebrows.

"That smell... is that alcohol?"

Satoshi promptly replied, "Nope, just whiskey bonbons."

As if Eba cares about the difference. In any case, she seemed to lose interest in the smell and handed a bundle of paper over to me.

"Oreki-san,"

Ah, yes. I stood up to receive the copies. It was the script that I requested from Eba the other day. With this, I would be able to find out just how much Hongou intended to put in her script.

"It would've been better if I had this yesterday,"

Indeed it would have been better if I had had this earlier. I then smiled bitterly upon noticing my thoughts. Didn't I decide not to care much about this problem? Maybe I was getting fired up after shooting down Nakajou's and Haba's theories in quick succession.

If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick. At once, I opened the script and looked up the part mentioned the day before, to find out if there was any mention about the surroundings of the scene of the crime. Without even searching, the page I flipped to ended up being the part where I was looking for.

Kounosu: "There's another set of master keys in the office, can someone go get them?"

A cut here is recommended prior to shooting the door being unlocked.

Upon unlocking the door, only the boys are to enter the room. (The girls are to stand side by side at the door.)

Kaitou-kun is to lie on the ground. While it may be plain to the observer, please have him hold his arm to emphasize the pain. He is unconscious and unable to call out for help.

Sugimura: "Kaitou!"

The boys are to run towards him.

The order of who reaches him first is fine.

Upon helping Kaitou-kun up, Sugimura-kun is to discover the blood on the floor with his palm.

Sugimura: "Blood."

The girls will <scream> together.

Katsuda: "Kaitou! Dammit! Somebody help!"

Katsuda-kun will go and open the window. (Please be careful not to get injured by the glass.)

Please take a few moments to shoot the outside of the window. Make sure there are no traces of footsteps outside.

Katsuda-kun is to go towards the Left Stage, whether it's through the stage or the backstage corridor is fine. Though as the stage is filled with rotting wood, please take extreme care when walking through it.

It was written in quite some detail. I see, no wonder she was so stressed out if the whole thing was written in such a style. From the description "Make sure there are no traces of footsteps outside." - it was how Nakajou had said, when Hongou went there the grass had still not yet grown completely. Based on this fact, Nakajou was actually right.

As I was thinking, Chitanda said to me, "Is that a script?"

"Yeah."

She seemed pretty hammered.

"Looks good, very good. I want to have it."

...She's really drunk. Normally it would have been fine to just hand it to her, but as I'm quite worried about her now, I decided not to. In turn, I called out to Satoshi, "Satoshi, you have a book binder?"

Satoshi gave me an indignant look.

"As if anyone would carry that around."

"You have a stapler then?"

"I do have one; it's a small one, though."

He placed his hand inside his drawstring bag and took out a stapler. Not everyone carries such things around with them either. I quickly stapled the pages together.

"I wonder what we should do with this?"

"Losing it would be bad, so you keep it with you,"

As per Ibara's instructions, I placed the script copy into my shoulder bag. Upon seeing that we were finished, Eba spoke.

"Then, let us go. We'll be heading to the Class 2-C classroom."

Upon exiting the classroom, a tune started playing on cue. It's the light music club today, the song was... *The March of the Black Queen*. I kept wondering why for the past few days the music would play upon us leaving the room. I reckon it probably has something to do with our appointment being at 1pm, which would be the time when the music clubs would take turns having their practice sessions on different days, as I do not hear music from other music clubs.

Ibara asked Eba, who walked ahead of us, "Who're we meeting today..."

"Sawakiguchi. Sawakiguchi Misaki, of the marketing division, though she was hardly involved in the filming process. As the filming is incomplete, advertisement of the movie has also been stalled."

Then she shouldn't be included as part of the crew, isn't that kind of misleading? Such a straightforward question was responded to by Eba with a straightforward answer.

"Sawakiguchi was deeply involved in the early planning stages of the project as well as the direction it would take. So she might have some good ideas concerning the mystery."

She then added, "At least that's what Irisu has determined."

Hmm, initial staff member, huh? Though Eba may say Sawakiguchi might come up with some good ideas, to me it's just another member of a motley crew. Being involved in deciding the direction of a project wasn't really much. As Irisu had mentioned, and based on our conversations with Nakajou and Haba, Class 2-F's movie has no other direction apart from that of the mystery genre. As if someone involved in deciding such a direction would be able to deduce anything... Though as I thought that, I said nothing.

We came upon the connecting corridor, when suddenly Chitanda raised her voice.

"Oh! I remember now!"

"W-what is it, Chi-chan?"

Ibara staggered as Chitanda practically shouted into her ear, while Chitanda looked quite happy as she placed her hands before her chest.

"This Sawakiguchi-san, she's good at drawing, isn't she? My memory seems to be fuzzy today, I can't believe I couldn't remember who she was just now."

Hmm? Chitanda knew who she was? Eba turned her head around and asked, "Drawings? Sawakiguchi does occasionally draw some illustrations, but how did you know that?"

Chitanda smiled and said, "In the Arts Preparation Room. Oreki-san, you should know. And yet you're quite mean to keep quiet about it!"

Now she's got me dragged into this. She sure is a merry drinker. Thank goodness she's of the pleasant type. Umm, where were we? The Arts Preparation Room?

As I tried to recall, Ibara got there before me.

"Oh, she's one of those girls that borrowed that strange library book!"

That strange book, a mean way of describing it, but that reminded me. This spring, I was involved in a quiz challenge involving art and the names of many girls. And Sawakiguchi was one of those girls.

As though trying to recall, Chitanda's eyes wandered round and round.

"Yes, that Sawakiguchi-san. If I remember correctly, her drawing was the one that looked kind of strange,"

While I wasn't too familiar with memories regarding someone else's artwork, as a member of the Manga Studies Club with an interest in all things visual, Ibara nodded in agreement.

"You're right, I remember as well. Whether her drawing was terrible or full of personality, her art just seemed different from what her classmates were drawing for their assignments."

"Maybe she was drawing it in an abstract style?"

Though not familiar with the situation, Satoshi decided to say something.

Ibara said with a troubled look, "Something like manga that looks poor at first glance, but is actually good?"

Walking some distance ahead of us, Eba laughed softly.

"You've seen Sawakiguchi's art? In that case, you probably won't find it strange once you meet her in person."

I wonder what she meant. What's she trying to insinuate?

Eba stopped as we arrived outside the Class 2-C classroom.

The girl there had her hair tied into a chignon. Rather than a chignon, calling it a Chinese hair bun would be more appropriate. With two Chinese hair buns wrapped with cloths adorned with dragon patterns on both sides of her head, she wore a tank top and jeans. Her skin was slightly tanned. In her hand was a magazine... it seemed to be an astronomy magazine. The overall mismatching girl noticed our presence and waved one of her arms, smiling to us.

"Ciao!"

And greeted us in Italian. Chitanda promptly greeted her back without hesitation.

"Good afternoon, Sawakiguchi-san."

Sawakiguchi gave a big sigh, and shook her head in an exaggerated way that reminded me of those overreactions seen in American movies.

"No, you don't seem to get it. When I say 'ciao', you should greet me back with 'ciao' as well! Otherwise it won't connect. Now, let's do this again. Ciao!"

I looked on with troubled eyes at Chitanda, who took it rather calmly.

"Oh, I'm very sorry. Then, ciao."

Yup, she's *really* drunk. Normally, Chitanda would have been panicking already after being faced with such unexpected responses.

Watching this all along, Satoshi whispered to me, "She's kinda eccentric, isn't she?"

"Seems so."

"So Kamiyama High School still has strange people that I don't know of..."

He sounded quite regretful, as though talking about a companion of his own kind. As though she'd heard us, Eba gave an awkward smile.

Meanwhile, upon hearing Chitanda's response, Sawakiguchi became very cheerful.

"Thank you for coming all this way. The name's Sawakiguchi Misaki."

In turn, Eba introduced us to her.

"These are the people from the Classics Club. Do go easy on them, Misaki."

Indeed, if she didn't go easy on us, I'd be at a loss. As Eba didn't introduce us individually, we had to do so ourselves. Sawakiguchi didn't seem intent on memorizing our names, or maybe she was just listening selectively.

After Satoshi announced his name, she said, "I see. Anyway, have a seat."

"Okay."

As we got ourselves seated, Eba took her leave. As soon as Eba closed the door, Sawakiguchi stretched her fingers so much we could hear them creak.

"So you're the ones who helped us out on our project, right? Well, how did you find the others' deductions? Were they good?"

Satoshi said bluntly, "Not really."

"They were rejected?"

"Yeah."

Satisfied with the response, Sawakiguchi nodded many times.

"That won't do, if the students don't endure hardships. Young'uns these days sure know nothing about hardships."

As she spoke in an exotic deadpan-like accent, for a moment, I nearly couldn't make out that she was saying "Young ones". She seemed to be the sort that likes to utter meaningless stuff, though I don't particularly dislike people with such interests.

On the other hand, Satoshi said jubilantly as though digging out some treasure, "Well, it is a difficult case, after all. If one intended to sit down and solve this, then it wouldn't be interesting if they didn't digest the details properly."

What do you mean "digest the details properly"? As far as I know, Satoshi has two mottos. The first was "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away." The other was "Conclusions cannot be made from databases alone." And it's not like he could solve the case himself using his own database anyway.

Sawakiguchi laughed.

"You guys sound pretty reliable. As expected of the people Irisu recommended. Well, if my assumptions end up scattered, I'm counting on you to sort out the bits."

"Leave that to us."

If you're gonna make such a verbal promise, don't come crying to me if you end up overdoing it. Though, Sawakiguchi was also overdoing it.

"Alrighty! Then I'll be counting on you fully."

Satoshi spoke in a frank and relaxed manner.

"Sawakiguchi-sempai, you probably must have had it tough. Is the marketing division making any progress? It must be tough with the product being unfinished, right?"

"True."

Sawakiguchi made a sulky expression and crossed her arms.

"It's true that without the product, we couldn't make any advertising posters. But we'll think of something."

"Then, what seems to be the problem?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

She sighed deeply.

"We still need a title. We can't do anything without a title. We can't even decide on a suitable font either. Normally a title would be added when a movie is finished, but the problem now is that the movie is not completed."

That goes without saying. Anyone involved in advertising during the Cultural Festival would have to make banners or posters, but it feels extremely lonely not being able to do anything due to the lack of a title.

Sawakuguchi then smiled at Satoshi.

"At any rate, we'll have to do something with the script. Before you hear my theory, I'll take any questions from you, so fire away."

Even when she asked us to fire away, I ended up flinching at her overenthusiastic manner. Yet Chitanda didn't seem to mind a bit.

"Then we will begin. Sawakiguchi-san, you were involved in choosing the direction the class would take for the festival, right?"

Sawakiguchi looked puzzled and said, "Well, yeah, I was involved."

"You decided to make a movie, with mystery as the genre, and you entrusted Hongou-san with the script, right?"

"Yeah."

Chitanda stretched her body across the table.

"How did you decide upon that? Please tell me."

What's she trying to ask? What's that got to do with the main topic anyway? Though she was still as articulate as usual, she didn't seem to be thinking properly. I promptly chided her.

"Chitanda, stop saying something so foolish."

At which point Chitanda turned her head towards me.

"But I'm curious about it!"

She then turned back towards Sawakiguchi. She's beyond help. Thank goodness that Sawakiguchi didn't take it badly as she smiled and waved her hand.

"If there has to be a relationship, then you could say everyone is involved in the decision-making process. I'm not saying this as a figure of speech, either."

Satoshi asked puzzlingly, "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing really. When a group has very few members, then direct democracy is the best way of getting things done."

"...So they're all given questionnaires to fill out?"

"You think pretty fast."

She tapped lightly on Satoshi's shoulders.

"Numbers are justice, and I believe the best happiness derives from the largest majority, or something like that. As we didn't battle it out through debates, basically we had things decided with questionnaires."

I still have doubts about whether the minority would be convinced as a result, but recalling what Irisu had said, the objective of Class 2-F was to get their project completed. If they could decide on something good, then

they would do it. So deciding via a questionnaire might be reasonable after all.

Chitanda asked once again, "Umm, does that include choosing Hongou-san as the screenwriter?"

Sawakiguchi thought for a moment, before smiling bitterly.

"Ah, that one's different. As Hongou was the only one capable of doing it, we didn't even bother with a confidence vote for her."

"She did it voluntarily?"

"No, she was nominated for the role. Though I can't remember who nominated her."

Upon hearing that, Chitanda raised her brows as though looking sad. I had absolutely no idea why, as I didn't know what feelings Chitanda was holding when she asked such a question.

While I was entrenched in thought, I noticed Sawakiguchi take something from beside her feet. It was a sack. Like a drawstring bag, it was the possession of strange people. Sawakiguchi stuck her hand inside.

"Hmm? I thought you were interested in knowing how we got things decided? Anyway... here."

She took out a notebook.

"I don't know if you'll find this useful, but I brought it anyway."

Chitanda opened the notebook that was handed to her. It was full of numbers and words, and it took me some time to comprehend the meaning of them.

No. 4 - What should we be making?

- Art gallery -- 1
- Play -- 5
- Haunted house -- 8
- Movie -- 10

Movie decided

No 5 What movie should we make?

- Taiga drama -- 1
- Absurd comedy -- 8
- Slapstick comedy -- 3
- Mystery -- 9
- Hard-boiled fiction -- 2
- Abstain -- 1

Mystery decided

As we flipped through the pages, more details were written.

No 31 What murder weapon should be used?

- Knife (stabbing) -- 10

- Hammer (beat to death) -- 3
- Rope (strangulation) -- 8
- Others:
Burn by oil -- 1
Thrown from high places -- 2

Knife recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)

No. 32 - How many victims should there be?

- 1 person -- 6
- 2 people -- 10
- 3 people -- 3
- Others:
4 people -- 1
Everyone -- 2
About 100 -- 1
- Invalid vote -- 1

2 people recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)

I understood after having a brief look at it. It was the collection of questionnaire results. Ibara, who also realized what it was, turned to ask Sawakiguchi, "May we borrow this? It might be important."

"Sure thing. It's already been decided, hasn't it?"

So whether we could borrow it was not a problem at all, huh? Seeing as we were chosen by Irisu to determine the validity of the deductions, she must have deemed the lending of such stuff trivial. What on earth was going on in Chitanda's mind? ...That was the real mystery.

She's probably just drunk.

Chitanda closed the notebook and carefully brought it to her chest.

She then inquired, "This may sound awkward, but may I ask something else from you?"

"Sure."

"Sawakiguchi-san, are you close to Hongou-san?"

That question sounded familiar. If I remember correctly, that was what she asked Eba as well.

Sawakiguchi looked a bit troubled as she replied, "Umm, we were only classmates, that's all."

With such details, one could determine what sort of person Hongou Mayu was. It was not hard to guess that she wasn't intimate with an eccentric person (according to Satoshi) like Sawakiguchi.

Chitanda didn't hide her disappointment as she lowered her head.

"I see..."

"You have anything else to ask?" Sawakiguchi asked Chitanda and the rest of us.

I didn't have anything in particular to ask, and neither did the others. Upon sensing we'd finally come to the main topic, Sawakiguchi leaned forward a bit.

"Right! Now you'll hear my theory. If you were to suggest that it wouldn't work, then... you know what I mean?"

She smiled as she said this in a mischievous tone.

"You know, when I heard the search for the killer starts right after what we have filmed, I wondered whether they're actually gonna go down that route."

Sawakiguchi started off with that while looking at us perplexed. Though we were at a loss trying to understand what she meant.

Ibara asked, "...What do you mean?"

"Well, if we're gonna make something for the Cultural Festival, wouldn't it better if we do it with a bang? It'd be pretty dull if only one person died.

"Haba may go all excited like an idiot and declare 'Now this is bloody true mystery!' Though for me, even if you tell me it's mystery, I just imagine it to be something else completely. I think Hongou must be thinking the same thing. The real story starts after all this."

Something else completely?

As though looking for something, or someone, she turned and spoke.

"You, over there."

She was speaking to me.

"What would you normally associate with the idea of 'mystery'?"

As if I could answer right away when suddenly asked like that. What do I associate with mystery, huh? As the books I've read would probably not

ring any bells for Sawakiguchi, I decided to list some other more famous titles.

"Something like the *Murder on the Orient Express*?

Yet that answer didn't seem to satisfy her, as she raised her brows.

"You sure are an anorak."

TL Note: In British slang, an **anorak** is a person who has a very strong interest, perhaps obsessive, in niche subjects. This interest may be unacknowledged or not understood by the general public. Although the term is often used synonymously with geek or nerd, the Japanese term otaku and the American term "fanboy/fangirl" are probably closer synonyms.

I ended up replying instantly.

"But I thought that was a pretty famous title?"

Sawakiguchi raised her finger and waved it while going *Tut, tut, tut*.

"That's why I said you're a 'detective fiction' anorak. Don't you realize? What titles do you normally find when you enter a video rental store under the genre 'mystery'?"

I had no idea what Sawakiguchi was trying to say. Looking around me, neither did anyone else.

Sawakiguchi raised her voice in irritation.

"In the questionnaire, when it was decided that we would do mystery, nobody said anything about detective fiction. Why don't you get it? When one mentions mystery, normally they would associate it with titles like *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*, right?"

I see, guess I was mistaken in thinking otherwise.

...No, wait a minute!

That's not mystery! The titles Sawakiguchi listed were more like slasher movies involving monstrous serial killers and innocent victims... In other words, that's horror, not mystery.

Yet surprisingly, someone actually agreed with Sawakiguchi. It was Satoshi, who nodded as though feeling moved from the bottom of his heart.

"Ah, indeed, that was a blind spot."

Was he trying to joke along with her? He seemed to have been waiting for the right timing to do so.

In order to stop him from joking any further, I said, "Satoshi, are you serious?"

By saying that, Satoshi is guaranteed to abide by his motto "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away", and stop right away. So I was surprised by his next response.

"Why do you ask?"

He's actually serious?

"Are you actually saying that *Friday the 13th* should be counted as mystery?"

"I wouldn't. But it wouldn't be strange if it was either."

Sitting beside him, Ibara demanded, "Explain yourself, Fuku-chan."

Nodding and clearing his throat, Satoshi answered, "All right. The problem lies with the semantic use of the word 'mystery'. It is indeed true that mystery includes detective fiction, basically a story with a killer and a detective. But on the other hand, elements of suspense would also be

counted as well. In that case, even horror titles would be included... like*Friday the 13th*."

Ibara didn't look particularly convinced. Satoshi relaxed his expression a bit.

"Mayaka, you ever been to a bookstore?"

"Yeah, but not often."

"Go look for magazines under the 'mystery' section. Comic magazines would do as well. You'll see what I mean. Or you could also look for the 'Summer Mystery Fair' lineup. You'll discover that detective stories aren't the only books listed under 'mystery'."

Hmm...

Like Ibara, I wasn't convinced, though I knew where he was coming from. It's true that most media works containing the word "mystery" would be printed in a blood-stained style. As detective fiction would rarely involve such tragic bloodshed, it's appropriate that such a "blood-stained" font would certainly not be suggesting detective fiction. Yet normally, no one would think of associating the word "mystery" that way. Sawakiguchi Misaki was just too original in her way of thinking.

Well, the problem now was how the conversation was relevant to the main problem.

With Satoshi's support, Sawakiguchi said while puffing her chest, "That's what I meant. Come to think of it, you guys are experts in deduction, I heard - that's why you were misled by your instincts. So I'm sure you'll know how this movie would continue? Basically, no one else has entered the room where Kaitou died, which means there's a seventh person amongst the group. Besides, Hongou was looking for another person in addition to the other six to appear in the movie."

Now that's the first time I heard that. Yet the way Sawakiguchi has gone about it, could it be... Soon enough, she voiced out my concerns,

"As everyone began suspecting each other to the point of losing trust for one another, the serial killer would appear. While we wouldn't know how many he would kill, it's probable that everyone dies in the end. So maybe we could arrange for a couple to survive and kill off the killer. The last scene would have the couple vanquish the killer, and then kiss in the glow of the sunrise. As for the title... How about in English? ...'Bloody Beast', or something like that. Sounds pretty creepy, huh?"

My concerns were completely spot on. Yet Sawakiguchi didn't seem to be joking. She even added "This should be able to convince everyone." She was acting as though horror was the correct answer. She believed too much in her own values that she couldn't accept any other explanation.

Unable to hide her troubled look, Ibara countered, "B-but Sempai, what about the sealed room? The door was locked."

Sawakiguchi replied matter of factly, "Does it really matter whether it's locked?"

"...!"

"Since it's a killer with supernatural powers, he'd just walk through the wall. Aha, then how about this? A cursed spirit. Hmm, that would also be good, an occult movie."

I- I see.

...I just had a feeling at what a flawless explanation that was. Who would have thought that the sealed room problem which had troubled us for four whole days could be solved by such a simple solution? "Does it really matter whether it's locked?" Never a wiser word has been said.

Ibara, Chitanda, and Satoshi all seemed to have something to say, though I was no longer interested in hearing them, as Sawakiguchi had wonderfully deduced that it was the workings of a poltergeist.

Since it doesn't really matter whether the door's locked!

We returned to the Geology Room.

The first to oppose Sawakiguchi's proposal was Chitanda.

"She's wrong, she's definitely wrong. Sawakiguchi-san's theory does not reflect Hongou-san's true intention!"

"Of course. She seemed pretty serious though. It's hard to tell whether she's joking or not."

Ibara too agreed with Chitanda.

Seeing the both of them fervently opposed to Sawakiguchi's proposal, Satoshi probably felt mischievous as he said, "Then try and prove it wrong,"

He added with a gentle smile, "...Theoretically."

Jeez, Satoshi can be mean sometimes. Ibara held her tongue. That was to be expected, as Sawakiguchi had more or less given up on even deducing the case. Whether it's the sealed room, alibis or the murder weapon... they can all be explained away by the fact that "the killer is a poltergeist with supernatural powers". Simply perfect.

Faced with such a perfect despairing situation, Chitanda refused to budge.

"But it's wrong."

"That's why I said try to disprove it theoretically."

"It's wrong, it's just wrong, because... Oh!"

What was it? She seemed to have thought of something.

No, turns out she was just stumbling aimlessly as her eyes wandered drowsily.

"Ah, it's like a kaleidoscope." she muttered.

A kaleidoscope?

...Before I realized, Chitanda's face had gone white. Though her skin was normally quite pale, this time it was whiter than before. I didn't even get to ask whether she was fine or not before it happened.

Chitanda's body began swaying left and right, before finally falling flat on the nearest desk with a thud.

"Chi-chan!"

Ibara tried to help her up, but it was no use. Before long, we could hear her snoring softly. She seemed to have passed out from drunkenness. It's probably not good to stare at her sleeping face. To think that she could take seven whiskey bonbons before collapsing despite each containing so much alcohol... Guess I'll let her rest for now.

As I met Satoshi's gaze, he shrugged his shoulders.

While I wasn't about to avenge Chitanda's fall, I still said, "What about you, Satoshi? Do you accept Sawakiguchi's theory?"

Satoshi smiled and shook his head gently.

"It's true I was interested in her bold imagination, but practically I find it hard to believe. Though I have no basis for disproving it."

So Satoshi's also opposed to it.

I smiled.

"Well, unfortunately, I'm also interested in such imagination."

"Figures. After all, she managed to solve everything with just one simple explanation, finishing everything in one go, so to speak. So it's not unreasonable for you to be interested in it as well."

"Well, it's not exactly free from contradictions."

As I unconsciously let that slip, Ibara's interest was piqued.

"So it can be disproved?" she said while raising her voice.

Contradiction, or something of the sort. While it wasn't exactly a long explanation, I still spoke.

"If you consider Haba's words yesterday, then Sawakiguchi's theory cannot be correct. However, it's not really something complicated.

"Even as Hongou has collapsed half way into making the script, if they were to make the latter half of the movie into a splatter or occult horror movie, then they're gonna be needing plenty of props, that's the truth. And wasn't it said that they lacked the most important prop needed for all that?"

"The most important...?"

Ibara looked puzzled.

Satoshi turned and said to her, "You know, when Haba was complaining near the end,"

Ibara seemed to recall thanks to that hint.

"Ahh!" She yelled and met his gaze, "I know... The fake blood."

"Yup. Hongou's instruction asked for enough fake blood not just for Kaitou alone. As Haba did complain about Hongou's instruction, no matter what, this meant Hongou's instruction did not involve filming of any scene with lots of killing. As Hongou did not intend for any scenes with lots of bloodshed, she only requested one packet of fake blood. She did not request any other weapons or makeup either. As if that's possible. At any rate, Sawakiguchi had said it herself,"

Satoshi took over what I was about to say.

"A horror movie with only one victim is just too lonely."

I nodded.

Perhaps Sawakiguchi was serious in thinking that way. She may be a bit too self-righteous that anyone else might view it as absurd nonsense. It might work if she had guessed some of it correctly. But as she only worked with the marketing division, she was not aware of the work done by the other divisions, so she ended up guessing wrongly.

Feeling bored for some reason, Ibara muttered, "Hmph, explanations are just supplementary,"

Quite an esoteric way of putting it, I thought.

Neither Satoshi nor Ibara had any objections. And so Sawakiguchi's theory was considered and duly buried. But this meant all three detective wannabes' theories had been rejected...

All we could hear was someone snoring. It seemed Chitanda had yet to wake up.

5 - Let's Try This

After meeting with Sawakiguchi, we expected Eba would come, but in the end she didn't. It would be bothersome for us if she did not relay that we had rejected Sawakiguchi's deduction. I wonder what she's up to... At any rate, as the sun was setting, even the energetic Kami High students were beginning to scatter homeward, and we, too, began tidying up the club room. Well, I'm sure there's a way to contact them if something unexpected were to happen, as Chitanda does know Irisu quite well.

When Chitanda finally woke up, she was so embarrassed after realizing she was so drunk that she fell asleep that her face went very red. Though it seemed like she still hadn't completely woken up, as when heading towards the school entrance, she would occasionally wobble to and fro. I hope she reaches home safely.

Chitanda was accompanied by Ibara as they left school, while I walked together with Satoshi for half the journey. As we exited the school gate, Satoshi swung his drawstring bag as he grumbled alone.

"So we ended up rejecting them all. What will happen with the movie, then?"

Wasn't it obvious? For three days no one has figured out a correct solution.

So the only way was to not complete it.

After hearing that answer, Satoshi smiled while raising his brow.

"What a miserable answer. So it's basically *The summer grass - It is all that's left of an ancient warrior's dream*, huh? Or rather, *All of Naniwa is dream after dream.* If Chitanda-san woke up from such dreams, she'd probably make trouble."

TL Note: Satoshi is quoting poems from Matsuo Bashō and Toyotomi Hideyoshi Both allude to the incomplete movie project being nothing but a "dream".

"What are you gonna do now?"

"Me? I'll be busy from now on. I don't have the time to help reduce stress for other classes."

We walked amongst the sparsely scattered students heading home. Under the crimson skies, the cool breeze blowing in the late summer was rather cold. Summer was truly coming to an end.

At the first traffic intersection, Satoshi pointed to the path where we part ways.

"I got something else to do, see ya."

And promptly left.

Since I'm all alone, I guess I'll head home.

Indeed, the movie was probably not going to be completed... I recalled the meetings with the people of Class 2-F during the past four days.

Nakajou - Armed with a passion to complete the movie, but not used to solving riddles.

Haba - Confident and prideful of his knowledge of mystery, with the conviction that his deduction was correct.

Sawakiguchi - Self-righteously declaring her method to be a matter of fact, but ended up being too far-fetched.

They all tried their best. Regardless of whether they were thoughtless, haughty or careless, their passion of wanting to complete their own project could not be faked. Though as we were entrusted with the

responsibilities of judges, we ended up rejecting all their deductions. The reason being that they were simply wrong.

Well, I guess it can't be helped. They have my sympathies, but it's not our fault. This may sound cruel, but I'm not so softhearted as to oblige myself to put out a fire on the opposite shore of a river. That's why I said I did not want to get involved in this in the first place.

As I approached the residential streets, I could soon see my house. I'm just gonna get some sleep when I get home. Like Satoshi, I have no obligation to burden myself with another class's troubles. The responsibility for the movie being incomplete lies with the crew's lack of planning. They should not have gone ahead with such a project to begin with. I adjusted the shoulder bag that was slipping off my shoulder, and looked upwards at the sky.

As I returned my gaze to the ground, I noticed someone waiting for me in front of my house.

Standing at the end of the intersection where the road signal "stop" was written was Irisu Fuyumi in her school uniform. As I realized it was her, she walked a few steps towards me and said, "Do you mind taking some time off to have some tea with me?"

Incredibly, I nodded honestly and agreed.

Being in the unfamiliar situation of accompanying Irisu, we walked along the river. Just as I was wondering whether there were any cafés here, a reddish brown curtain and an electric lantern entered my field of vision. It was not the sort of trendy café which high school students would normally visit when heading home after school. Irisu flipped open the

curtain in a nonchalant way and beckoned me to come inside. As I entered, I noticed the corner of the curtain was embossed in small lettering with the name of the place: "Hifumi".

It was an elegant looking tea house, with tatami mats and filled with the fragrant smell of roasted tea. The place had no counters, and all tables were boxed in cubicles. Needless to say, they were all covered in tatami mats. Irisu sat down neatly without creasing her uniform skirt, and promptly ordered a cup of green tea from the waitress wearing an apron.

"And what will you have?"

"....."

"Well?"

"Oh, when I heard you say have a cup of tea, I never really thought we were actually coming to a tea house. All right, I'll have iced green tea then,"

I picked an appropriate drink from the menu, to which Irisu smiled bitterly.

"It's my treat, so feel free to order what you like."

I went back to look at the menu upon being told that, though I became even more confused. They had prices higher than the average crappy dinner.

While I knew why Irisu invited me, as she had remained silent, I decided to coldly do nothing in turn as well. Though Irisu merely waited calmly.

Before long, our green tea and iced tea had arrived alongside some complimentary sweets. After taking a sip of her tea, Irisu spoke.

"So, Nakajou won't do?"

I nodded.

"Haba as well?"

"Yeah."

She asked while breathing in, "Then what about Sawakiguchi?"

It wasn't our fault, but,

"...I don't think her idea would work."

All this time Irisu merely stared into my eyes, which made it feel like a very long time. For the next second or so, which felt more like half a minute, I was pinned down by her gaze.

Irisu breathed out deeply.

"I see."

"Is it a pity?"

I took a sip of my iced tea after asking. It was a new taste befitting of its price... I might say that, but in truth I couldn't taste anything. Irisu didn't sound like she was blaming me, neither did she sound upset... It may just be that our personalities just don't match.

Irisu turned her gaze towards her cup. Before long she opened her lips.

"Pity is such a strange word for you to use. The one who should be feeling pity ought to be me or my friend, not you."

It was as she said, which was basically the stance I took for the past three days... But why did I say the word pity myself?

"No, it is a pity. As we could not finish it,"

Softening her tone rapidly, Irisu smiled.

"You sympathize with us?"

"Just my emotions filling in."

I picked up one of the sweets with a toothpick and placed it in my mouth, and the sweetness instantly flowed into my mouth. This was especially true when eaten after drinking the green tea.

Remaining calm as ever, Irisu inquired, "I would like to ask you something. Who was it that rejected Nakajou's deduction?"

Now how should I answer this? Yet Irisu's expression revealed that she already knew. So I made no attempt to hide from her.

"...It was me."

"Then, I presume Haba's and Sawakiguchi's as well?"

"Yes."

"Where were they wrong?"

Since she'd asked me, I explained. About the consideration for the length of the grass, the field of vision of other members, the first sealed room, the second sealed room, the use of a rope to enter via the window, the poorly maintained building, the meaning of the word "mystery", Hongou's instructions... I plainly summarized the essence of the past three days, to which Irisu listened intently. Occasionally she would sip her tea, though I could not read her mind as to what she was thinking.

"And that was why we could not accept Sawakiguchi-sempai's proposal."

As I finished, I noticed my tea was now half empty. Irisu merely said, "I see." And went silent.

Before long, she caressed her cup and spoke.

"Back then, when I requested that you take up the case, you told me that you would feel quite uneasy to have such expectations placed on you.

Yet for the past three days, what you have done has far exceeded my expectations. To think you could bury their deductions so neatly... It was just as I thought."

What did she mean by just as she thought? About no one's deductions being correct?

I was aware that I was gazing sharply at her, yet Irisu showed no signs of waver. Neither returning my gaze nor looking away, she said in a natural mood, "In the end, those three weren't suitable for the task. No matter how passionate they were, I realized from the beginning that they did not possess the skills needed to solve the problem.

"Of course, I'm not saying they are useless. Whether it's Nakajou as a leader figure, Haba as an outsider expert, or Sawakiguchi as a comedienne, they all possess invaluable skills. They were talented in their own right, but it is also because of that reason that I believe they could not succeed in the role given to them.

"If it hadn't been for you, I would have ended up adopting one of their proposals, and would not have realized any adverse effects it would have on the filming, resulting in the failure of the project."

A cold and ruthless assessment.

Irisu had never had any expectations from any one of them.

Then who was it that she had expectations for?

Irisu moved her hand away from the teacup and sat upright. The eyes that looked straight ahead were aimed at none other than me. I got the feeling she was not here to convince me, but to knock me down.

"For the past three days, I have been thinking about how you have proven your skills. I thought, if there's such a thing as a detective critic, then as one who has critiqued other detectives so well, you were good

enough to become a detective yourself. I firmly believed my expectations were not misplaced. You are special.

"So, once again I make this request of you, Oreki-kun. Will you please lend your assistance to Class 2-F and show us the right answer to the mystery?"

As she finished, she bowed her head.

I felt as though I was being watched with eyes assessing a highly valued artwork of a deceased artist. My head was filled with all sorts of thoughts. It was my skills, not anyone's, but mine. I was special. She had a request of me.

But should I believe such stuff? For so long, I have always thought of myself as an ordinary person without any particular talents. Even with the bothersome stuff Chitanda involved me in where I ended up solving it before Satoshi and Ibara, it was just luck. In essence, I was hardly any different from them. Yet Irisu did not agree. Those words shook me more than any words of coercion ever could.

Skills, huh? As a result of Irisu's request, for a moment, I started doubting my very own existence...

Though Irisu patiently waited for me, as I was at a loss for an answer, she relaxed her expression and said, "It's not like we're burdening you with any responsibilities or anything... Don't be so vexed."

"....."

"Then let me tell you a story. Don't think too much into it, it's just something I thought of.

"There was once a bench player on a sports team. Everyday she would work very hard in hopes of making it to the regular team. As to why she

could endure for so long, it was due to her love of the sport, as well as a modest ambition to make a name or some achievement for herself.

"Yet years had passed and she was still a bench player. As the team would replace the more talented players with other more talented players, it was only natural.

"Among this squad was a very talented player whose skills was on par with some of the top players out there. Of course, the bench warmer's skills were still miles away from this talented player. Then came a tournament, where this talented player was very active, and ended up being selected as the tournament's MVP. When she was interviewed, she was asked what the secret to her success was.

"She merely replied, 'I was just lucky.'

"Yet for the bench warmer, this answer rang with bitterness."

Irisu once again looked at me. I could feel myself getting thirsty again, yet there was hardly any tea left in my cup. The remaining coldness of the cup transmitted to hand.

She had revealed something in her words, it was as though the Empress had finally cast off her cloak. But should I say something then?

...I then heard her continue, "It means everyone ought to recognize their own talents... Or it would be painful to watch for those without."

I did not know whether the chill I felt was coming from my drink.

I did not feel I had any inferiority complex. My views on myself were merely the result of a long period of objective observation.

Yet Irisu had insisted that I was mistaken concerning my own worth with a resounding voice. Irisu was not the only one who had thought that. Satoshi, Chitanda, Ibara, and many others, too, have said the same to

me. Were they, too, seeing me via a long period of objective observation?

Besides, compared to Nakajou, Haba, and Sawakiguchi, didn't I feel I could do a better job than they did?

...Perhaps I should believe her.

That I do possess worth of some sort.

As I thought along those lines, I gradually nodded. Yet it was still a long time before I finally spoke, and during that time, Irisu merely waited for me without saying anything.

6 - The Blind Spot of 10,000 People

The next morning, after making sure I had the video cassette in my shoulder bag, I departed the house.

After making a promise to review the movie yesterday at the Hifumi tea house, Irisu handed over a video cassette she prepared beforehand and said, "We do not have much time left. I shall meet you at a place designated by you tomorrow at 1pm and hear your conclusion about this matter."

After considering my own house or the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich which I so frequent, I decided to meet her to at the Geology Room.

Right now, I was heading towards the Geology Room. It was nearly ten o'clock when I exited the residential streets and moved on to the main street. For the next fifteen minutes of passing through various cars and people, my mind was blank, save for a favourite folksong of mine which constantly played while I move my legs. I'd more or less forgotten about the details of the movie. It was inefficient to think in such a state.

At the end of the main street, a glimpse of Kamiyama High School could be seen. As I arrived there, a voice called behind me, "Hmm, Houtarou?"

Small town this was. I turned to find Satoshi, wearing his standard Kamiyama High School summer uniform and carrying a drawstring bag, getting off his mountain bike with a smile. I waved my hand in lieu of a greeting.

"You're heading to school as well today?"

He nodded and raised his brows.

"How rare for Houtarou to come to school of his own will during vacation. You have some business?"

"Am I not allowed to come to school if I don't have any?"

"Not at all. It's just that it's so out of character for you, something must be up."

I bit my tongue. I never thought about this, but it would seem my energy-saving behaviour was just as easy to read as Chitanda's curiosity-driven behaviour.

I had no reason to hide. No, I was thinking of letting them know, which was why I've chosen to meet at the Geology Room in the first place. So I said, "I'm on official imperial business from Irisu. She commanded me to designate a killer for Kaitou's death."

Whether it was on purpose or not, Satoshi went stiff for three whole seconds upon hearing that. For some reason, he then revealed a very cheerful face as he said with a raised voice, "Wow! Who would have thought? You were the last person in my mind who would accept such an errand."

"Oreki Houtarou's righteousness and compassion know no bounds."

"Nice quip there, Houtarou."

"I'm in a hurry."

Satoshi started walking alongside me as he pushed his mountain bike. As the road wasn't wide, I ended up leaning towards the side of the road.

"That's some change of heart from you. I wonder if it could have something to do with that? Want me to tell you what 'that' is?"

He prodded me, to which I remained silent.

"It's for Chitanda-san's sake, isn't it?"

He said something matter-of-factly. To begin with, it was a conclusion made in light of the results of the past few months. Nearly all the troublesome incidents which the Classics Club got entangled in were started by Chitanda. A pattern developed where she would coerce me to be deeply involved. Though there was one exception.

This was the second exception. I shook my head and said, "No, it isn't."

Though it was indeed Chitanda who brought the case forward, it was not due to her request that I came to school today.

Satoshi raised his brows at my unexpected response.

"It wasn't Chitanda-san? Then was it a whim? Or you're doing it out of charity... nah, can't be. While you didn't say it out, this is also in line with your motto 'If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick.' right?"

Of course, that was my original intention. As a result of Satoshi being completely frank about it, I got even more displeased. I said bluntly, "Must I explain even that to you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not really. But I didn't want to pretend I wasn't interested in knowing why. Should I apologize?"

I smiled and let the matter rest.

We walked silently together for a brief while. As there was nothing else to say, Satoshi moved to get on his bike in an attempt to ride on ahead. While I found no need to stop him, I still called out to him.

"Satoshi,"

"Hmm?"

Though I called him, I didn't have anything in particular to say. Realizing this, I tried to be frank about the predicament I was in.

"...Do you think, do you think there's some things that only you could do?"

It was an ambiguous question. He tilted his head and replied cautiously, "I'm not sure why you're asking, but... amongst every person that ever lived in this world past, present and future, I do think that there's one thing that only I could do."

Could he, even in such conditions?

"And that is?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's the 'passing on the genes of Fukube Satoshi'," he said and smiled. He didn't sound like he was joking. It was his way of poking fun at his own Average Joe inadequacies.

"My bad. Allow me to rephrase,"

I thought for a little while.

"Within Kamiyama High School, is there a talent in which you consider yourself to be second-to-none?"

He replied at once, "Nope."

I was at a loss for words at how fast and precise his answer was.

Satoshi said with a carefree tone, "I told you before, Fukube Satoshi possesses no talents whatsoever. Take my passion to become a Holmesian, for example: there's no way I can become one. I do not have what it takes to enter an endless maze of knowledge just to pursue it. If Mayaka were to take up an interest in Sherlock Holmes, I can guarantee you that she would overtake my knowledge in three months' time. I'm the

sort that only takes a peek at the entrances and takes a pamphlet or two to read. I wouldn't call myself second-to-none on anything."

I never thought I would hear Satoshi say such things. Yet Satoshi said it calmly as though he were talking about the weather. As I remained speechless, he smiled mischievously.

"Now I get it, the reason why Houtarou wants to try and solve the movie mystery."

"....."

"Irisu-sempai has recognized your abilities as a 'detective', hasn't she? She must have said you were the only one who could solve this, and you ended up agreeing, right?"

Damn, was he a telepath or what? So I nodded.

"But this sure is some risky business, to lend your skills based on the words of 'the Empress' concerning your knowledge."

"But you aren't suspicious of it yourself."

"Maybe... Anyway, I'll be going ahead and setting up the video player."

Satoshi got on his mountain bike and proceeded to ride off. As he was about to step on his pedal, I noticed I had something I wanted to say. It would feel bad if I ended up not saying anything.

"Satoshi,"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know what you'll think of it, but I think you're worth more than that. I think there'll come a day when you'll be one of the best Holmesians in Japan."

Satoshi blinked his eyes, but soon returned to his default smiling expression.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to say to me, "Rather than a Holmesian, I'm just very fascinated by Sherlock Holmes, that's all. Besides..."

"?"

"...Besides, I now feel it was worth it for me to give that answer to you just now."

The movie was coming near to its climax.

The six members each took one key and went on separate ways. We awaited the tragedy that was to come, where Kaitou's mutilated body was to be discovered.

Using the dust-filled television in the Geology Room, I watched the still-nameless movie. The screen showed Kaitou's body being discovered.

Sitting some distance from me, Ibara said in admiration, "They've done quite a great job with that arm of Kaitou-sempai's. They made good use of the dim lighting to convince the audience that it's a real arm."

When she found out I had come to school for no particular reason, her reaction was one of surprise. When she heard my declaration to challenge the mystery left behind by Hongou, her eyes widened. Speaking of which, she came because she couldn't stand the thought of being left hanging by Irisu-sempai and decided to try to seek out the truth once and for all. She too could be quite a formidable person to deal with.

Satoshi added with a smile, "Now if only their acting was a bit better. In the end, it was the props division that performed the best."

And so I ended up watching the video, for the second time. While I'd heard that a crime scene must be visited at least a hundred times, I wasn't going to watch this thing that many times. Neither would Satoshi or Ibara, who merely came along just to watch the movie. And thank goodness for that.

As Katsuta ran towards the Left Stage, only to discover that the path was completely blocked, he was astounded and said,

"No way..."

The scene faded to black.

And the video ended.

Never tiring of menial tasks, Ibara stood up right away to rewind the video as well as turn off the TV.

To be honest, I had thought Chitanda would have come as well before I finished watching the video, as she does have amazing powers of observation and good memory. Though indeed she was unable to use her observation and memory to good analytical use, I was thinking of borrowing those talents of hers today.

However, she never came, so I asked Ibara, "Ibara, what's happened to Chitanda?"

Upon being asked, she gave a difficult expression. It was a smile mixed with some regret.

"Chi-chan's still sleeping."

"How come? She got a summer cold again?"

"No,"

She paused for a bit,

"...Hangover."

.....

"Now that's... rare..."

I nodded in agreement with Satoshi's excellent remark.

"Anyway,"

Trying to get back on topic, Satoshi shifted in his seat.

"Watching this again, I still don't see anything complicated about it. And it more or less shoots down any remaining bits of those three people's theories."

I agreed totally. After three days of revision, I realized that the mystery left behind by Hongou was not easy to solve, yet upon watching this video, I had only a light impression of it.

"It's hard to find something easy in something that's hard." I muttered alone.

Though having heard me, Ibara looked at me as though seeing a fool, puffed her chest out and said, "You're wrong, the mystery was filmed in too easy a manner."

"Really? How so?"

"Here's what I think: as a movie, it's filmed in quite a boring way that makes it hard to get the audience excited, which makes the mystery uninteresting. I thought if they put some effort into the acting and

camerawork, they might have made this into a more interesting sealed room mystery."

Was that so? I didn't think one's impression of a literary work would change depending on its technical issues. Just as I was disagreeing, Satoshi suddenly smiled as though he'd found a soul mate.

"A wise observation. It's true that when I first watched this and discovered this was a sealed room mystery, it didn't feel like one at all. If only they could put more effort into their acting... But was the camerawork really that bad?"

Ibara nodded.

"It was *bad*."

"How would you have filmed it then?"

"Me? Let's see... Take the first scene showing the Narakubo area, for example. If the cameraman had stood further away, then he'd be able to film the actors together with the ruins for better effect. Besides, hmm, though I didn't think of this at first, in the part where the rest of the members gathered after splitting up, Sugimura-sempai's face could be seen from the equipment room, right? I think it'd be easier for the audience to understand if that scene was shot from Sugimura-sempai's point-of-view looking down towards the lobby. Oh yes, and if that was done, we would be able to see Sugimura-sempai watch where the two members on the second floor went as well, and then switch the point-of-view to either one of those two. Besides..."

She went on and on. Ibara really does like watching detective movies, so it was just as appropriate that Satoshi motioned to stop her with a smile. If he hadn't done that, we probably wouldn't have heard the end of it from her.

I sighed and said, "We won't get anywhere if all we do is moan about how shoddily the movie was made,"

"True. In the end, the problem lies with the methods. How about we have a look at those? Maybe not all possibilities have been shot down. Though we may have a time limit, this should be fun."

As Satoshi finished, an intruder had arrived.

The door to the Geology Room was opened loudly by someone I didn't know. The mark on his collar indicated he was a first-year.

Moving his eyes away from me, he found the person he was looking for and shouted, "There you are, Fukube!"

Upon seeing him, a bitter expression appeared on Satoshi's face. Though I could hear him click his tongue, he quickly reverted to his smiling face.

"Why, if it isn't Yamauchi-kun? You here to join the Classics Club?"

The guy called Yamauchi disregarded Satoshi's wise-talk and moved towards him, grabbing him by the collar.

"H-hey! There's no need to be so violent!"

"Oh, don't give me this! I'm doing this for your sake! Omichi's serious! What're you gonna do if you end up repeating a year?"

The name Omichi rang a bell in my mind. He was the strict maths teacher. Now I see. I crossed my arms and smiled at Satoshi.

"Satoshi, you really should take your revision classes, you know? Weren't you saying you'd be busy studying for your exams?"

Yamauchi, whom I presumed to be one of Satoshi's friends, instantly grabbed him from his chair.

Even so, Satoshi didn't lose his composure as he pleaded, "That's the spirit, Houtarou! Keep it up and you'll be solving Hongou-sempai's mystery in no time!"

Seeing as he was unaware of the situation he was in, Yamauchi yelled, "The revision class is about to start, idiot! Hurry up and move along!"

"Noooooo~~!!! What about the sealed room? The sealed roooooom~~!!!"

Satoshi disappeared, leaving a trail of screams behind.

Sigh. Now how should I comment on this? If I have to put it in one sentence: Was he an idiot? ...Just as I was thinking that, he ran back here. Taking his notebook out from his drawstring bag, he shoved it towards me.

"Regrettably, things are out of my control. As it's come to this, I leave the rest in your hands... See ya!"

He ran off again. Well, good luck. Here's wishing Satoshi gets promoted to second year.

As soon as the storm-like event had passed, Ibara too stood up.

"Well, I should be going as well."

"Really?"

"What's with those eyes? Irisu-sempai didn't ask me to help you, after all... I'm on librarian duty at eleven. If I had known what you were doing today, I would have changed my shift in advance, so it's all your fault for deciding on such short notice," she said harshly as she picked up her bag and proceeded to leave the Geology Room.

Standing by the door, she turned and said in her usual apologetic way, "But... I'm sorry, Oreki."

I waved my hand to send her off.

I was now left alone in the classroom. I sighed, stretched my back, scratched my head, crossed my arms, and closed my eyes and I began thinking.

If I slowly recalled the movie I just re-watched, and the facts I deduced these past three days... I attempted to link them together. If it were me, I would...

...And finally I came to a conclusion.

As it was a hard to believe conclusion, I reviewed it myself many times over. Yet I could find no flaws with it. So it had to be this one.

I muttered, "This, is Hongou's true intention."

I glanced at my wristwatch. The time had gone way past twelve and was fast approaching one without me noticing it. I quickly took out a rice ball from my bag to fill my empty stomach.

After finishing that, I gulped down a can of green tea, which was simply nowhere near the glass of iced tea I had yesterday, when someone knocked at the door.

"Come in."

The one who entered was none other than "the Empress", Irisu Fuyumi, who was in her school uniform today. Whether she was in her casual wear or uniform, she never left any openings. I stood up out of courtesy and motioned her to sit in the seat before me. Upon her taking her seat, I too sat down.

Irisu skipped the formalities and went straight for the main topic.

"First, I would like to hear whether you have come to a conclusion or not."

I gulped a bit, and nodded in lieu of answering.

Irisu raised her brow just a little bit.

"...I see," she said while not particularly revealing much emotion, as expected of her.

"Then, let's hear it."

"Okay."

My lips were still wet from the can of green tea that now lies standing on the table.

I had already decided where to start, so I went straight for the answer at the end.

"The key to this mystery is needless to say a sealed room, the room where Kaitou... sorry, Kaitou-sempai died. No one is able to enter or leave that room."

Maybe it was my imagination, for I just saw Irisu loosen her mouth. Realizing it herself, she said as though trying to smooth things out, "Oh, you may speak as you normally would and dispense with the honourifics."

A most grateful permission. It was quite bothersome to have to consciously speak in a formal manner and add honourifics to everything.

I nodded and went straight for the core of the topic.

"...As I have discussed the composition of this sealed room just yesterday, I may be repeating some of what I've said, so please bear with me.

As the sealed room is in the Right Stage, and considering that the window was not filmed being opened from the outside without damaging it, the only way the killer could enter was via the door. But how? The movie did not reveal whether there was any physical trick used to open that door. Then we should surmise that the killer simply used the master key obtained from the theatre office. I think Satoshi calls this way of thinking Occam's razor.

"However, the killer was not able to enter the right corridor, which was the only way to get to the Right Stage. That is because Sugimura was constantly watching from above. If one was to obtain the master key and enter via the right corridor, then it could not have been one of the six people there.

"In that case, what does it all mean?"

I stopped there. I wouldn't say the following wasn't interesting, as I didn't think that myself. It's just a waste to be so plain about it, that's all.

"If the killer was not amongst the six, then there can only be one explanation... There was a seventh person present."

That was my conclusion.

Irisu looked at me with stern eyes, as though I'd just uttered some idle gossip.

"A seventh person? Like what Sawakiguchi suggested?"

"Under certain conditions, that is. It did sound quite ridiculous when I first thought about it, as it was Sawakiguchi that said Hongou was looking for

a seventh actor. When I thought about that, I was certain that there was a seventh person present."

Without saying a word, Irisu urged me to go on. Even if she had any objections, she was probably waiting for me to finish first. That makes things easier for me.

"Yet you told me Hongou intends to give the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery. So I won't say that this was the work of some slasher that suddenly appears. By the way, I only just noticed this when re-watching the video, but a lot of strange things were observed. Fortunately, Satoshi had them all written down in this notebook; let me read it out to you.

"...Kounosu sees map, A light was turned on. Probably a hand torch...

"They went to the remaining room to look for Kaitou.

"...The corridor was dark and poorly illuminated. The torch was turned on...

"Did you notice something?"

Irisu replied instantly, "The torch?"

"Exactly."

I licked my lips, as this was most important.

"As a result, it was never revealed who was using the torch. One should be able to figure out who it was in scenes right after the torch was turned on; for example, when the scene of the crime was discovered. Though there may have been time for the person to hide the torch, it would be too unreasonable for that to happen."

Irisu gave a suspicious look. As I knew she was not satisfied after thinking it through, I voiced out her reservations.

"I understand that you're thinking that's just the illumination. But first, let's leave that aside for now,"

I could not tell whether she was convinced or not. I continued anyway.

"One more thing, no offense to those who love making movies, but this movie was pretty boring, whether it was the acting or the camerawork. Yet here was a hint. I don't watch a lot of movies, but even I could tell it was a boring movie. Especially the camerawork; you may not realize it, but it's as though not much effort was being put into it. But what if there was actually a reason for that?

"What did I mean when I said no effort was put into the camerawork? To put it in the simplest terms, didn't you find the position of the cameraman awkward for most of the scenes? For the majority of the movie, the cameraman was basically following the six members... Now do you see what I'm getting at?"

Though her demeanor was still calm, I noticed Irisu's eyes slowly widening. As expected for "the Empress" to realize so quickly. Yet even Irisu Fuyumi would not be able to foresee this deduction. The seventh person that I suggested was...

"...Are you saying that the seventh person is actually the cameraman?"

I nodded. I realized I was getting cheeky about it.

"There were seven people in total. It was those seven that decided on and went to Narakubo. The screen only showed six people, while the seventh was the one holding the camera. The other six only spoke appropriately upon being told to look into the camera to give their thoughts, meaning they were conscious of the presence of a cameraman.

Rather than call him the 'cameraman', we should call him 'the seventh person'.

"This seventh person was also the one turning the torch on and off. No matter how you see it, the way the torch was turned on and off just looked too deliberate. But if you think from the angle of someone carrying the torch, then it wasn't unnatural at all. The shoddy camerawork was due to him following everyone else around; it would make more sense if you consider the cameraman as a character."

As I went on, I realized Irisu was getting more and more interested.

"And then, this is the most important part, after everyone had split up, the camera was left in the lobby without anyone holding it. The scene then faded to black; in other words, the camera was momentarily turned off, before being turned on again by one of the members that returned to the lobby.

"Thus it was easy to guess how the crime was committed. The seventh person waited till everyone was scattered across the theatre, put down his camera, and took the master key from the theatre office. After killing Kaitou, he locked the door behind him and returned to the lobby to wait for everyone else to return.

"That sums up my deduction. If Hongou hasn't found a seventh actor yet, I suggest you hurry up and do so."

I finished everything in one go and proceeded to sip my can of green tea.

That was my deduction.

Irisu quietly evaluated my case before inquiring, "Two questions.

"First, if what you said is true, wouldn't it be too unnatural for nobody to interact and speak with him?"

I had already prepared an answer for that.

"Perhaps Hongou had intended for that. In other words, as the seventh person was totally ignored by the other six, there was no room for him to speak."

"Second, if that's true, then the characters themselves would have deduced it themselves, for the most suspicious person would be the one who left the lobby last and returned first. Furthermore, this seventh person did not circumvent the 'second sealed room' which you mentioned, as his movement should also be noticed by the other people. In that case, there would be no mystery to speak of."

I purposely smiled.

"Well, to quote from Sawakiguchi... Does it really matter whether it's a mystery?"

"....."

"The main purpose of this movie was to satisfy the movie-makers themselves rather than the audience. It is not something for the characters to worry about. As Nakajou had remarked before, it's fine as long as the audience considers it a mystery; it didn't matter whether the characters themselves thought otherwise... Think about it, wasn't this why no one was designated as the detective for this movie? Because the characters had already guessed who the killer was without even deducing."

A minute's silence ensued. Irisu remained quiet and looked down without glancing at me. Was she troubled by such a bold suggestion?

Yet I was hardly panicking, as this deduction was fine as it is. No matter how long Irisu evaluated it, the result was inevitable.

And finally, Irisu whispered, "Congratulations,"

"Huh?"

She raised her head, and unlike her usual meagre expression, gave a very cheerful smile as she said, "Congratulations, Oreki Houtarou. You have solved Hongou's mystery. It was a surprising and bold deduction, but all the facts line up, so it has to be the truth. Thank you as well, as we are now able to complete the movie."

She stretched out her right hand.

I blushed.

And shook her hand.

It was a firm handshake. Irisu then patted my shoulder with her left hand.

"I was indeed right with my judgment. You have the skills, which no one else possessed that could never be replaced."

...I see.

Irisu went on with her cheerful expression, "How about this? To commemorate your hard work, I'll let you set the title for the movie,"

A title, huh? I didn't think about that.

Yet, it was not bad to leave a name to commemorate the rare occasion of me believing in my abilities. I thought for a while and said what came to my mind.

"Alright, considering the contents... How about 'The Blind Spot of 10,000 People'?"

"Hmm,"

Irisu nodded many times.

"A fine title. It's decided then."

With the title of the unnamed movie decided, this bothersome business that has taken up four whole days of my summer vacation has finally been resolved. While I gained nothing material in return, I did not feel the least bit worse off.

The fact that I played the role of the "detective" gave me a sense of fulfillment.

7 - Do Not End the Show

For the next three days, I didn't do much besides recollecting what I've done.

As entrusting three fools was inappropriate since they could not produce any results, in the end, it was an outsider like me that accomplished what they couldn't. Though it was true that as an observer, I was able to glean facts from each of their statements, I was the one that had solved it; Irisu's words had prompted me to believe that. This made me realize I had abilities which I could speak of. As a result, I was now immersed in a sense of satisfaction as though intoxicated by too many whiskey bonbons.

To put it in an unassuming way, it was a refreshing feeling.

Ever having Hongou's mystery solved on Friday, the script was prepared by Saturday night (according to some first years who'd seen him, the substitute screenwriter who had to write the rest of the script on such short notice was worked till he looked half dead, though I had no way of finding out). And so Class 2-F's filming was finalized by Sunday evening. It was an epic turnaround from a seemingly desperate situation. I received a phone call on Sunday night from Irisu giving me her gratitude, to which I offered her my heartfelt congratulations.

And so came Monday, three days after the solving of the mystery, when the Kamiyama High School summer vacation came to an end.

As the Classics Club did not meet up during that weekend, until today I was not able to inform Chitanda of what had happened so far. After lessons had ended, as I was running a bit late due to some other errands, I rushed towards the club room. I wasn't interested in showing off my

achievements, but I just thought it would be better to let her know as I climbed up the steps of the Special Block. I don't deny my footsteps felt rather light as I walked.

Upon arriving at the doorstep of the Geology Room, I sensed a strange atmosphere. The classroom looked dark, as though the curtains had been drawn. I silently opened the door and noticed the TV was taken out and was playing the movie "The Blind Spot of 10,000 People". Chitanda, Ibara and Satoshi were all watching the TV with their backs toward me.

Though by the time I entered, the movie had already gone into the credits, the names of the cast and crew in a gothic font flowed upwards on a dark background. As filming was only done yesterday along with the editing, this credit roll was probably prepared in advance.

Ibara stood up to stop the video and noticed me.

"Oh, Oreki,"

Chitanda and Satoshi both turned around. Satoshi pointed to the TV.

"Hey, Houtarou. We saw it."

"Class 2-F's?"

"Yup. Eba-sempai came just now to give this to us. So this ending was solved by Houtarou, huh?"

As Satoshi was always showing such a smiling face, I had no way of finding out what he really thought of the movie.

Still, I asked, "So how was it?"

"Not bad. Or rather, it was interesting. To think it was the cameraman of all people."

Pushing the rewind button on the tape player, Ibara said in a criticizing tone, "You'd already thought of that back then, hadn't you? You really hide too many things in your mind."

"I hadn't thought of it when I was with you guys. I'm not that mischievous as to toy around with people until they panic," I said as I placed my shoulder bag on the table and stretched my waist.

Truth be told, this felt like an anticlimax, as these guys were not as surprised as I thought they would be. As I was feeling quite satisfied with how surprising the conclusion was, I was kind of expecting them to look astonished with it. I should have expected nothing less from these fools; it was perhaps good that Satoshi and Ibara were hardly naïve.

Then, what about the naïve Chitanda?

Our eyes met. Chitanda then turned her head to face me.

"Oreki-san,"

"Yeah?"

"I was surprised."

An honest opinion.

She then turned her head back and looked into the distance as she said cautiously, "Besides, I..."

She then noticed something and smiled.

"Umm, maybe later."

A peculiar reaction. Now how should I put this? I couldn't tell whether she was appraising or criticizing.

Clapping his hands, Satoshi said, "Anyway, you did well, Houtarou. 'The Empress' is satisfied, the movie is completed. The audience will also be glad about such a surprising development. The day is fast approaching when Kami High's name spreads far and wide due to the detective Oreki Houtarou. We should raise a toast for this occasion."

And he promptly took out four bottles of Yakult from his drawstring bag. He's got all sorts of ridiculous items in that bag. Ibara stood up to put a leash on Satoshi's celebratory mood with a bitter voice.

"Now's not the time to be concerned about other classes' problems, Fuku-chan. Ever since that movie preview, we've not made any progress with 'Hyouka'. I'm gonna to check on your page progress starting today, since you did ask me to help you with your manuscript progress, after all."

Satoshi's smile froze. He placed two bottles of Yakult before Ibara. As if that was going to dissuade her. As expected, Ibara proceeded to get things started by opening the curtains. And so Class 2-F's movie was finally put aside as the Classics Club resumed its activity of compiling its anthology.

As sunset approached, the umpteenth meeting regarding the anthology "Hyouka" came to an end. As I gathered the written notes which were scattered around, Satoshi and Chitanda left the Geology Room. Leaving the rare sight of just me and Ibara behind.

Moving the TV back to where it was, Ibara turned to say something she had just thought of.

"Oh yeah, Oreki. Can I ask you something?"

"If it's the manuscript, don't we not need those until next week?"

Ibara shook her head.

"I'm talking about the movie. What was the title again? Something about 10,000 people."

As it was quite embarrassing for me to utter a title which I myself had thought of, I urged Ibara to continue.

"What about it?"

"You came up with the solution, right?"

I nodded.

What was she trying to say? She seemed to be cautious with her words.

"All of it?" she asked.

As I'd not seen the full version, I gave an ambiguous answer with some vigour.

"Most."

Upon answering, she gave me a sharp look. She then spoke in a strong tone that was different from before.

"In that case, what did you think about Haba-sempai's theory, then? Regardless of whether the trick he mentioned was interesting or not, it was totally not shown in the movie."

She didn't seem convinced. So I asked her, "What about Haba's theory?"

"Aren't you ignoring the intent?"

She murmured and placed her hands on her waist.

"Never once did the movie show any use for a rope."

Rope... The item that Hongou requested Haba to prepare. She even emphasized its importance. Come to think of it, it was mentioned before.

As I was at a loss at how to respond, Ibara went on.

"Having the cameraman as the seventh person is interesting, as you could feel the intensity of all the characters looking straight into the camera. But, that would leave no room for the rope to make its appearance."

Indeed.

No, that's not it. I countered, with my voice raised a bit.

"The use of a rope is probably confined to specific tricks. Maybe the cameraman would use it to hang himself in the end, wouldn't he?"

Ibara looked at me with exasperated eyes.

"What're you talking about, Oreki? If that's the case, why would Hongou emphasize its use? If they were to shoot such a scene using something as robust as a rope, then they wouldn't need to worry about its safety. Since Hongou-sempai specifically asked for a rope strong enough to support a person... I think something's missing here."

The last sentence probably contained some of Ibara's concerns, but I hadn't noticed it. When she said I had missed something, I didn't think of it that way. It was probably just something trivial...

But why had I forgotten such details?

"Well, anyway, I thought your deduction was interesting. But seeing as how strict you were in dismissing the theories of those three people, I was thinking maybe you had thought of something which they had all missed," Ibara said as she covered the TV with a plastic cover and

proceeded to pack up her bag. As she said she'd be returning the key, I decided to leave the room ahead of her.

With Ibara's words still ringing in my head, I descended down the steps of the Special Block. My deduction should have taken into consideration all of the facts. While some of the details like the acting and dialogue may be off a bit, overall, it should reflect Hongou's true intention. Yet I'd somehow forgotten something. Or rather, because it did not match my deduction, I had unconsciously ignored it. It can't be, I was not the sort to twist the facts just to get to a right answer... Or at least that's what I wanted to think.

Looking at my feet alone, I realized I was now on the third floor. Just as I thought I was going to walk down to the second floor while still immersed in my thoughts, a voice called out to me.

"Hey, Houtarou,"

I turned to find nobody. It sounded like Satoshi... No, I wasn't imagining things, I clearly heard him. I waited for a bit, and indeed my name was called out once again.

"Over here, Houtarou,"

A hand emerged from the men's room and beckoned me to come over. If this were night time, it would make a fitting horror scene. I smiled bitterly and walked over there, where Satoshi was waiting.

"What is it, Satoshi? I'm not interested in taking a pee with you."

Very quickly, the smile disappeared from his face as he said quite seriously, "I do not have such interests. This place just happens to be convenient."

"Convenient for what? This place stinks."

"I was just thinking of cleaning up this place... Anyway, it's because no girls can come in here."

Ah, I see. Then it must be that.

"So, what is it you don't want the girls to know? You have some porn collection you want to show me?"

Though I was joking, Satoshi didn't smile.

"You sure know how to put things. If that's what you want, I could prepare something that could get us involved with the police. Anyway, just hear me out."

Alright.

"In other words, it's something Ibara and Chitanda can't know?"

"Something like that. They would just wonder what we were talking about if we discussed it openly."

Satoshi then lowered his voice.

"Houtarou, that movie, did you really figure out Hongou-sempai's intention?"

Even he was telling me this. Though he meant well, I realized I was making a bitter expression.

"Yeah."

Hearing that, Satoshi turned his eyes away from mine.

"I see... Is that really her intention?"

Was he trying to make me feel uneasy? Not sure of what to say, Satoshi didn't continue while avoiding my gaze. So I prodded him.

"Is my guess wrong?"

"Well, sort of."

He nodded ambiguously. He then said with all his heart, "Houtarou, this is bad. You've got Hongou-sempai's intention wrong. While I could not figure out how it's wrong, I can tell you it's not that."

...Quite a blunt opinion. Rather than being shocked or unhappy, I was more dumbfounded. If Satoshi wasn't joking then he must be serious, and right now he was dead serious.

Even then I regained my composure and replied, "What basis do you have for saying that?"

"While I'm not too sure myself, can I say something flimsy?"

"If there's some fatal contradiction in my deduction, you think I wouldn't have noticed it?"

Satoshi shook his head clearly.

"There's no contradiction at all. But that's not what I'm looking at. I really meant it when I said your deduction was well-crafted. But that's not what Hongou-sempai had intended."

"In other words?"

He cleared his throat.

"Houtarou, think about Hongou-sempai's understanding of detective fiction. Starting from a blank slate, what has she been reading in order to prep herself for the script?"

Puzzled at what that had to do with all this, I answered, "Sherlock Holmes."

"Exactly. Now listen, Hongou-sempai's experience with detective fiction is only limited to Sherlock Holmes. Though she said she'd stick to the Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction, she would not have read Ronald Knox's works yet. Besides, the trick that you proposed to Irisu-sempai is a type of literary trick. You hear? A literary trick."

Well, I follow you loud and clear.

"It's a trick made to fool the audience, right? By hiding the seventh person from the view of the camera, it may be considered a literary trick as well."

"Right. Now, I'm going to join the dots here,"

As though speaking very solemnly, Satoshi took a deep breath and said in one go, "Such a literary trick did not exist in Conan Doyle's time."

"....."

"With a few exceptions, such a trick of coming out from behind the stages did not appear until at least Agatha Christie's time, in other words, way into the 20th Century. I may not know Hongou-sempai well, but I'm quite certain she's not read any of Christie's work!"

At first, I had no idea what Satoshi was trying to say. Upon digesting the meaning of what he'd just said, I began to waver a bit.

Hongou's understanding of detective fiction was still confined to the 19th Century, the gas-lamp filled streets of London where Sherlock Holmes

resided. It was probably so. And Satoshi said such a literary trick did not exist in such times.

For a short while, I stood there like an idiot ruminating on what I'd just heard. I could not reject what Satoshi had observed. Upon receiving a strike from an angle which I did not expect, my mind seemed as though it had stopped working.

Satoshi looked at me in such a state and said sympathetically, "Personally, I would give that movie an A grade. I particularly liked the part where the cameraman emerged into the light. But if you were to say that was Hongou-sempai's intention, then my objection is not completely without merit."

"Wait,"

I somehow spoke.

"We have no idea how much Hongou-sempai read. So we can't say that she did not come across such literary tricks outside of Sherlock Holmes, right?"

It was a stubborn response. Satoshi patted me on my shoulder and said briefly, "...Well, if that's what you think, then it's fine with me as well."

After Ibara's and Satoshi's combo attack, the damage I suffered was quite substantial. I didn't think I was that fragile. But it's not like I was well prepared; normally I would have taken it more easily, but now I was not able to find anything to counter their objections. So it was not unreasonable for me to start doubting whether my deduction was actually wrong. Though of course I wished for it to be right.

Which was why, as I came down the last flight of stairs and saw Chitanda loitering there, my heart skipped a beat. She was clearly waiting for me, yet she lowered her eyes upon seeing me.

"Umm, Oreki-san... I have something to tell you."

Et tu, Chitanda?

As she looked rather apologetic about it, taking into consideration what had just transpired, I had an idea what she was trying to say and sighed in half resignation.

"Something you couldn't say in front of Satoshi and Ibara?"

Chitanda widened her large eyes and looked surprised at me. She then nodded gently.

She led us quietly towards the school gate. Just as I wondered why we couldn't do this in a café, she told me the usual place we went would be too far, while the ones nearby would be frequented by Kami High students. But wouldn't we be surrounded by them as well while we're walking and talking? It's still broad daylight now. I decided to start the conversation.

"You wanted to talk to me about the movie?"

"Yes."

"Something that troubles you?"

"...It would seem so."

Her reply was soft.

Was this how it felt to await a verdict?

Being impatient, I said, "There's no need to hold back. Satoshi and Ibara too thought that that wasn't Hongou's true intention. I... I'm also beginning to think so as well."

Chitanda lifted up her downcast and serious look.

I continued without looking at her, "So what about you?"

"...I, too do not think it is correct."

"Can you tell me why?"

Silence, then Chitanda nodded.

What should I do when she answers? I didn't know as well. The filming's already finished, and any revision would have to wait till after the festivals. When thinking logically, it was a pointless and inefficient action... It seemed some speck of self-respect still remained within me.

"Won't you tell me?"

The traffic light before us turned red, stopping the flow of people, and many Kami High students waited along the traffic crossing as a result. Chitanda was probably hesitant to speak in such a situation as she remained silent. As she turned to look at me, I could see the sorrow within those gentle eyes of hers. It was now that I could notice Chitanda's elegance hidden within her large eyes.

As the signal changed, the wave of people began to move, and Chitanda began to speak slowly.

"Oreki-san, do you understand what it was that bothered me?"

Why'd she have to go in circles? I decided to answer curtly.

"What the ending for Class 2-F's movie was? We already did that."

Yet surprisingly, Chitanda shook her head.

The long hair behind her back flowed to and fro as she did.

"No. For me, it didn't really matter how the movie ended. So I thought Oreki-san's proposal was wonderful."

"Then..."

"I was feeling curious as to what Hongou-san was intending to do."

Saying that, Chitanda glanced at me. I was probably looking like an idiot right now. If she was concerned about Hongou, then it's the same thing as being concerned about the movie's ending.

Sensing my thoughts, Chitanda emphasized, "No matter how we think about it, this whole matter seemed strange. Was it really true that Hongou collapsed due to mental stress? ...It might be, but then, why didn't she entrust it to someone else? Like Eba-san, for example."

She tilted her head. Somehow her meaning was not properly conveyed.

"Aren't you mixing up the subject and object here?"

"Oh... I'm sorry. I mean, why didn't Irisu-san ask one of Hongou-san's close friends, like Eba-san, for example, about whether she had any literary tricks prepared for the story?"

.....

That's a presumptuous question. Since Hongou would need some time to be alone in order to rest, it would be better not to stress her further with stuff concerning the script.

Yet Chitanda went on before I could say anything.

"Hongou-san should have possessed the entire script. Even if she had collapsed, I do not think that she would not at least convey the essence of her ending, in other words, the literary trick, to Irisu-san. But she never did.

"At first, I would have thought that Hongou-san had pushed herself to work so hard till she fell ill. Yet from her classmates, it seemed she was compelled by them to write the script rather than doing it of her own will. It felt as though she was too timid when it would have been better to just refuse them.

"In the end, was it because she lacked the confidence? Was it because she felt so embarrassed at not being able to finish the job that she couldn't bring herself to meet everyone? But surely someone would have visited her and learned the truth?

"...But that is not right. I may not be familiar with mystery stories, but I feel that the people involved in the project weren't used to them themselves. Besides, they all seem like nice people... I do not believe they would have criticized her harshly had she not been able to produce a script."

I don't know about them being "nice people", though their opinions were all over the place.

As though speaking to herself, Chitanda went on further.

"Then, what was it that drove Hongou-san to the wall? We just can't tell no matter how we look at it. I've been curious all this time with this peculiarity."

She slowed down her pace and looked straight at me.

"If Oreki-san's deduction was the truth, then Hongou-san should have already told Irisu-san about it. The same would be true if one of the others' deductions was the right one.

"I think I want to understand Hongou-san's feelings about having to give up on something halfway through, about being frustrated at not being able to continue what she started... But that movie we saw did not answer those questions. So I think that was what has been bothering me."

I murmured. All this time that I, Nakajou, Haba and Sawakiguchi were trying to figure out the truth of the case, Chitanda was trying to figure out Hongou.

Indeed, that's it. Take Eba, who called Hongou a good friend, for example. If they had wanted to know whether any literary trick was used, all they needed to do was ask Hongou. But what if Hongou were to get seriously stressed out by being asked? ...Yet the way Eba described Hongou being her good friend was too carefree. When Chitanda asked her what kind of person Hongou was, she seemed rather annoyed and wondered what we could ever learn from her telling us this. But this was her good friend that was seriously ill, was that the way to answer a question concerning her?

Perhaps I was treating this script as a mere literary exercise. From the setting, the characters, the murder, the literary trick, the detective, the killer...

All of these should have reflected the mind of Hongou, someone whom I've not even met. Yet I never realized it at all.

...Some "detective" role I've been given!

Thinking that, I sighed deeply.

Wondering if she was mistaken, Chitanda said frantically, "Oh, but, this wasn't meant as a criticism of you, Oreki-san. I was surprised by that resolution scene as well. While Hongou-san would probably not have thought up such a scene, I thought it was a wonderful improvement."

I smiled bitterly.

As this means I've practically been hired as a substitute screenwriter more or less.

That night, I was thinking in my room. Lying on my bed, I stared at the white ceiling.

Somehow it seemed I was mistaken. Though the shock of learning that has since faded.

Compared to Nakajou, Haba and Sawakiguchi, my failure wasn't too bad. I broke a smile. Some special person I am, huh? Irisu sure knows how to flatter. I felt stupid at believing my own hype. In the end, I was only chosen because my story was better than the other three.

I realized where my thoughts were going... Have I really failed?

Of course, it became clear that my proposal did not match Hongou's true intention. But how did Irisu, or even Class 2-F, view this? From their point of view, it would have been the successful completion of a project, a movie, that was in danger of being abandoned. From that perspective, I was successful. The movie "The Blind Spot of 10,000 People" was a movie that even the annoying Ibara had to acknowledge.

To put it further, it could be argued that my deduction would still be a success, regardless of how it was received. In other words, I do have the skills, which no one else possesses, to make this a success.

Even then, would those words have any meaning? The words that Irisu spoke at the tea house Hifumi: "Everyone ought to recognize their own talents." The words which she spoke as though they were the truth of this world and had an effect on me, did they have any meaning at all?

After she told me that, I lost all reckoning of things besides myself. That feeling turned me upside down, and gave me an inflated image of myself. I imagined the scenario where Nakajou's proposal was adopted, where Haba's proposal was adopted, where Sawakiguchi's proposal was adopted. And I vainly thought how good it felt that mine was adopted.

Yet all these illusions had now disappeared.

At the moment when I wondered what I would gain from this, I had completely forgotten about that person. The next thing that appeared in my mind was the fact that I was not doing it to please Chitanda. I was merely thinking this naturally... In that case, I should give this case a closer look, since I had nothing to lose after all.

Yet, where did I go wrong? Did Irisu know that I'd gotten it wrong?

And then there's the matter which Chitanda was curious about. Why didn't Hongou tell them the true plot? Or could it be that she couldn't? Furthermore, why didn't Irisu inquire about it from Eba?

Lying before me was the data, the stack of papers in my bag which I had forgotten.

...Yet, my thoughts just wouldn't connect. I had no idea whether the flash of inspiration was due to luck or talent, so I decided not to dwell on it any

further. I turned around on my bed, shifting my field of vision from the ceiling to the walls of my room.

And my eyes fell upon a strange sight.

I got off my bed and walked towards the bookshelf. While this room was now my room, my sis left some of her stuff in here from back when it was her room. In the corner of that bookshelf was one of her books. As it was full of these strange books, I hadn't taken much notice of it before.

The title of the book was "The Mystery of Tarots". I had no idea my sis was a Kabbalist.

Under the moonlit and streetlamp filled night, I opened the book in amusement. The page I was turning to was of course the chapter covering "The Empress", of which the contents filled up ten pages. I read the first line of it:

III. The Empress

Motherly. Fertility. Sensuality.

Hmm, reading these alone, Irisu sure doesn't match any of these attributes. No matter how I see it, "the Hermit" would have been a better match for her. To begin with, Irisu's "Empress" nickname had nothing to do with Tarot cards. Satoshi was the one that mentioned Tarots.

Come to think of it, he had matched each member of the Classics Club with a specific Tarot card. If I remember correctly, Ibara should be...

VIII. Justice

Equality. Justice. Impartiality.

Well, no mistake about that. Satoshi's explanation that "People of the 'Justice' types tend to be stern with themselves" seemed to be spoken specifically with Ibara in mind.

A change in mood wasn't so bad, so I looked up at "The Magician" for Satoshi and "The Fool" for Chitanda.

I. The Magician

Initiative. Creativity. Focusing.

No Number. The Fool

Adventurism. Curiosity. Impulsive.

Haha, I see. It was just as the definition had put it. I laughed. Though would a Tarot expert also define "The Fool" as someone who "loves to roam", and "The Magician" as someone who's "sociable"?

Now what about me? Let's see, "Strength", was it?

XI. Strength

Inner strength. Determination. Kinship.

What is this?

It totally doesn't match. While I might not be aware of my own personality, even I could tell that this was completely off the mark. Satoshi ought to have known from my motto: "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick."

So why did Satoshi choose this card for me then?

Now that I think about it, Satoshi said he meant it as a joke. If it's Satoshi's joke... then there must be some other meaning which I've not gotten.

...I must have too much free time. Or it was simply me not wanting to admit failure. Yet looking at "The Mystery of Tarots", I suddenly understood what Satoshi's joke meant. As there was one line in the annotations below:

"Strength - Illustration of a ferocious lion being subdued (controlled) by a gentle woman"

In other words, Satoshi was saying I've always been controlled by women. From my sis, to Chitanda, and now Irisu.

W-Why you, Satoshi, getting all cocky. There's no way I could be controlled by them! At any rate, this was me we're talking about.

I returned to my senses.

Thinking deeper, "Strength" could be right.

Anyway, it's not like it's got any deep meaning. Compared to "Justice", "the Magician" and "the Fool", "Strength" has a different method of interpretation altogether. The interpretation for my card was based not on

the card's reading, but on the illustration instead. As expected from a Satoshi-like joke, which had no basis whatsoever.

Well, it was a good distraction, as I felt a sense of satisfaction that I've forgotten about Hongou's case. Guess you could call that energy saving as well, I thought as I headed back to sit on the bed.

.....

...?

I quickly got up.

It was purely a coincidence.

The next day, I met the person that I wanted to meet. And I met her at the most convenient time, in other words, after school.

That person was of course, Irisu Fuyumi. Upon seeing me, a smile appeared on her face as she greeted me.

"Oh, it's Oreki-kun. Thank you for all that you did before. Have you seen the movie yet?"

Unable to hide the stiffness in my expression, I said, "No, not yet."

"I see. I thought it was a good movie. It's something that could not have been done without your help, so you should give it a look... Oh yes, we'll be having a party to celebrate the completion of the movie this Saturday, and I think you'll be invited as well."

I shook my head, as the show's not over yet.

Sensing something strange with my attitude, Irisu raised her brows a bit, though her tone remained the same.

"I see. It's your choice, after all. Now then,"

As she turned to walk away, I stopped her.

"Irisu-sempai,"

I then said to the Empress who turned back around, "We need to talk."

We met at Hifumi, the same tea house as the other day.

As Irisu wasn't treating today, I decided to pick some Yunnan tea after some careful consideration of the menu. I thought this tea house was only limited to Japanese tea, but it turns out it also serves Chinese tea, red tea and coffee. Irisu was again having green tea like last time.

After waiting for our drinks to arrive, Irisu spoke first.

"You said we needed to talk?"

I was at a loss at where to start. Though the first place to start naturally was here.

"Sempai, in this tea house, you said that I possess a certain skill, that I was special, right?"

"Indeed."

"...May I ask what skill that is?"

Irisu smiled softly,

"You want to be told what it is? Why, the skill of deduction, of course."

So that's her answer, huh?

Feeling neither angry nor indignant, I refuted her answer in an incredibly calm way,

"You're wrong."

"....."

"I'm no expert in detective fiction. Though I'm familiar with this line: 'You're no detective, but you'd make a fine detective writer.' It was spoken by the culprit upon the conclusion of a fantastical deduction."

Irisu remained silent and sipped her tea. I could feel Irisu had discarded her courteous appearance and had reverted to her true self. So I repeated what I said.

"I'm not a detective, but I make a fine detective writer, huh?"

The sound of a teacup being placed loudly on the table was heard.

Indeed, upon being told this, she said in a nonchalant manner, "Where did you get your hint from?"

So she was responsible for it, huh? Irisu Fuyumi had so very easily shattered my wish which I did not really hope would be shattered.

Rather than being surprised, I replied calmly, "Sherlock Holmes."

"...I see."

"Hongou-sempai seemed to have studied detective fiction via Sherlock Holmes. Chitanda borrowed some of her paperbacks the other day, but due to her getting drunk off those whiskey bonbons, I had completely forgotten about the matter. Only recently have I gone through them."

Irisu smiled. It was a different type of smile from before, more like a smirk.

"And what have you discovered from that?"

"...A connection."

I took out a note from my chest pocket. It was a list from two of the six volumes of Sherlock Holmes short stories (strictly speaking, there are only five volumes, though this is the Nobara translated version we're talking about), namely "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" and "The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes", with each title grouped under "Concentric Circles" or "Crosses".

Concentric Circles

- The Man with the Twisted Lip
- The Adventure of the Blanched Sailor
- The Adventure of the Three Garridebs

Crosses

- A Case of Identity
- The Five Orange Pips
- The Adventure of the Speckled Band
- The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor
- The Adventure of the Three Gables
- The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

Irisu occasionally looked at me with sharp eyes.

"At first, I thought this was merely Hongou sorting out which ideas to use for her story, but I was mistaken. I asked Satoshi, who told me that 'Red-Headed League' and 'Three Garridebs' had the same literary technique, but when I then asked why 'Three Garridebs' was marked with concentric circles while 'Red-Headed League' was marked with a triangle, he was left dumbfounded."

Irisu urged me to continue with her gaze alone.

"I inquired for further details from Satoshi... Irisu-sempai, would you be bothered if you were spoiled on any of the stories of Sherlock Holmes?"

"No, not at all."

"Is that so? But if you do not wish to be spoiled, then please tell me at once, so I can figure out a way to ask you to cover your eyes or ears."

I said that simply as a precaution.

Though it's not like I'm really spoiling anything important.

"First, the concentric circles.

"'Man with Twisted Lip' - Holmes was tasked to find the whereabouts of a man who seemed to have completely vanished. The client was the man's wife.

"'Blanched Sailor' - Holmes tasked by a man to investigate the whereabouts of his friend who had seemingly been quarantined by his family. Though in the end it turns out all was well and the friend didn't need to be quarantined after all.

"'Three Garridebs' - Basically a retelling of 'Red-Headed League', though it was memorable for a scene where the usually calm and reserved Holmes showed signs of distress over Watson getting injured. By the way, Watson was only slightly wounded."

I sipped my Yunnan tea, though the taste was rather bland.

"Now, let's move on to the crosses. As there are more of these here, I'll just pick three to talk about.

"'Five Orange Pips' - A young man seeks the help of Holmes after witnessing many strange deaths around him. Yet Holmes was unable to prevent his death.

"'Speckled Band' - A woman asks Holmes to investigate the strange death of her sister. The killer was none other than her stepfather, who was seeking to obtain the girls' inheritance.

"'Three Gables' - A woman whose son had recently died asks Holmes for advice when she was approached to sell her house and everything in it. The root of the story revolves around the dead man's desire for revenge over the woman who had dumped him."

I stopped and waited for Irisu's reaction.

Irisu waved her front bangs and said, "I see."

"Upon hearing the summaries of these stories, I have a vague idea of what kind of stories Hongou preferred. It was hard to tell that she did not have any prior experience with detective stories from such preferences. Satoshi expressed disbelief upon being told that she put a cross over 'Speckled Band' while marking a circle for 'Blanched Sailor'."

I took a sip.

"Now here's my explanation: perhaps Hongou prefers happy endings over tragic endings. She didn't seem to like any ending where anyone died."

Irisu didn't respond.

Probably a sign of admittance.

"It we think along those lines, then many questions can be answered. Firstly, little fake blood was required. And then there's the results of the questionnaire."

"The results of the questionnaire?"

From my shoulder bag, I took out the notebook which I borrowed from Sawakiguchi, and then opened it and pointed towards the relevant page.

No. 32 - How many victims should there be?

- 1 person -- 6
- 2 people -- 10
- 3 people -- 3
- Others:
4 people -- 1
Everyone -- 2
About 100 -- 1
- Invalid vote -- 1

2 people recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)

Upon one glance at the note, and it was only a momentary glance, Irisu said with a sharp look, "...How did you get this?"

"I borrowed it a while ago. Anyway, take a look at this question.

"This was merely asking how many victims there would be, but what does this 'invalid vote' mean? In other questions, if someone was undecided and abstained, it would be marked as 'abstain'. Besides, someone had even voted to have 'about 100' dead, which was more than the number of actors. In that case, what's with this 'invalid vote' then?"

As though amused, Irisu picked up where I left off.

"The vote probably voted for no victims as there was not enough fake blood, and was declared invalid as a result?"

I looked seriously at Irisu, who looked back at me calmly.

I said in a low voice, my conclusion, which was, "Hongou's script contains no victims whatsoever."

Irisu raised her upper lip slightly, or so I thought.

"As expected."

Irisu sure was a calm person, as she sipped her green tea without looking the slightest bit shaken. How could she remain so calm? Could it be she could read my thoughts?

Quietly, she placed her teacup down.

"If you understand that much, then that saves me from having to explain further. It is as you say, Hongou's script has no victims. She said she was unable to think of any mystery that involves death. That's the sort of girl she is."

I continued, "Nevertheless, your classmates did not think of that and continued with their ad-libs in the movie. Even though Hongou did not join in for the shooting of the movie, she would have been informed by

Nakajou. Above all, the script never once mentioned Kaitou being dead. He merely suffered a serious injury and collapsed to the point of not being able to respond, which was what we saw in the movie.

"Ibara praised the work put into the fake severed arm, meaning that part was included in the original script.

"And yet Kaitou was suddenly killed off. Without Hongou knowing, the story had turned from a brutal assault into one of murder."

Irisu nodded.

Yet I felt no satisfaction, and my words slowly became frantic.

"This is purely my speculation without any basis whatsoever. Yet, I must say it regardless.

"Hongou did not tell her classmates that the movie had made a serious flaw which deviated from the script. She couldn't bring herself to tell them to abandon the film which they had shot, nor tell the props division to throw away the prop which they had worked so hard to make, since she's a timid and serious person, after all. I think even Hongou herself realized afterwards how illogical it was to have a mystery where no one dies.

"And this is where you come in, Irisu-sempai."

Irisu looked at me without any expression, or rather, she was smiling softly.

I was hardly feeling excited, yet my voice was slightly raised as I said, "This would make it Hongou's fault, as it meant she would have to abandon her script and make drastic changes. And so you arranged for her to 'get sick', thus making the script 'incomplete'. This would lessen the damage considerably. You gathered your classmates, and started a deduction competition."

And I concluded, "And so, you held what was basically a scenario contest. By telling them the script was incomplete, anyone would want to try completing it. That way, you get to preserve Hongou's dignity while they do the deducing. Upon seeing that your classmates were not up to the task, you decided to bring us into this as well. Nobody, including myself, had realized we were actually creating something on our own. You merely arbitrated and decided, based on a reference point, on which was the best story.

"Am I right in saying that my creation was used as a measurement to fill in the gaps left by Hongou so that she would not be hurt?"

"From the beginning, I never once said you were wrong."

"So it's true then!?"

I leaned forward slightly.

"That when you said that I possess certain skills, it was all for Hongou's sake? That's some alternate plan you thought up."

"....."

"You persuaded me in this tea house, using a story about a sports club, right? You told me that those with abilities who weren't conscious of it were a pain to watch for those without. Right now I can tell you this: Surely you're joking, Irisu-sempai. So what about one being self-conscious? So what about them being a pain to watch? I don't think someone with a nickname like 'The Empress' can be so sentimental about these things at all.

"You merely wanted the results, that's all."

When Satoshi said he didn't have what it takes to be a Holmesian, I told him that was not so. So who was right? It didn't really matter. If he could, then good for him. If he couldn't, no harm done either. That's all.

Whether it's passion, confidence, self-righteousness or talent, these things mean nothing from an objective point of view. By praising my talents, Irisu was merely making me dance to her tune. It was effective, as I ended up creating a work that satisfied her.

"When you said everyone ought to recognize their own talents, was that a lie!?"

...Despite my strongly worded question, Irisu didn't move one bit. She looked neither timid nor ashamed.

During the moment of silence, without withdrawing, I quietly thought to myself.

She really does suit her nickname of "the Empress". Recalling what Satoshi had told me, she was good at manipulating those around her. And only an Empress could do so without feeling any sense of shame. She was beautiful.

Devoid of any emotion, Irisu replied sternly, "It was not spoken from the bottom of my heart. But it is up to you to decide whether that counts as a lie."

She then met my gaze.

Silence.

...I realized I was smiling.

I then spoke from the bottom of my heart.

"Hearing you say that, I now feel very relieved."

8 - Credit Roll

Log No 00299

Mayuko: i'm really, really grateful
Anonymous: enough of that already
Anonymous: you've been thanking me for a while
Anonymous: you even thanked me at school, so there's no need to thank me anymore
Mayuko: but still
Mayuko: thank you
Mayuko: since it was all my fault
Mayuko: even though everyone seemed to enjoy the murder scene
Mayuko: since it's that sort of script
Anonymous: just don't follow up with "i'm sorry"
Mayuko: i'm sorry
Mayuko: oh
Anonymous: everything's been taken care of
Anonymous: though it didn't end up as the movie you had hoped for
Anonymous: what's important is that it's been completed
Mayuko: don't say that
Anonymous: which line were you responding to?
Mayuko: oh, i meant, the part about it not ending up as i hoped for
Mayuko: what i would hope for most
Mayuko: would be for everyone to go hurrah in the end
Anonymous: really, you're so easy to read

Mayuko: hmm?
Anonymous: nothing

Log No 00313

A.ta.shi♪: seems like you got things sorted out
Anonymous: all thanks to you, sempai
A.ta.shi♪: why you're welcome. glad to be at your service
Anonymous: though i feel sorry for him
Anonymous: for doing something like that to him
A.ta.shi♪: you really think so?
Anonymous: really what?
A.ta.shi♪: as in you're really sorry towards him
Anonymous: since you're on the other side of the world
Anonymous: i felt like bluffing
A.ta.shi♪: lol, figures
A.ta.shi♪: but you know?
Anonymous: yes?
A.ta.shi♪: you've lied to me as well, haven't you?
A.ta.shi♪: so you keep your trap shut!
Anonymous: i, lied?
A.ta.shi♪: that's right. you shouldn't manipulate people on the other side of the world
A.ta.shi♪: especially me
A.ta.shi♪: just kidding
Anonymous: i wasn't really lying
A.ta.shi♪: you wanted to protect the girl who did the script, which is why you asked me for help, right?
A.ta.shi♪: in other words, the problem lies with the

script, right?
A.ta.shi♪: you knew i would reject solving such a hopeless problem
A.ta.shi♪: yet you still wanted to protect her
A.ta.shi♪: you sure know how to help yourself under the pretext of helping someone else
A.ta.shi♪: though it seems that idiot still hasn't realized
Anonymous: sempai
Anonymous: my priority has always been to ensure the success of the project
Anonymous: sempai?
A.ta.shi♪ has logged out

Log No 00314

Houtaru: will this be fine?
L: yes, this is good
L: you've got a strange username
Houtaru: i misspelled "houtarou", but correcting it is too bothersome, so
Houtaru: yet this feels strange
Houtaru: my last access time was only just now
L: huh?
L: oreki-san, is this the first time you've usd this?
L: used this?
Houtaru: maybe
Houtaru: oh well
L: so what was the script that hongou-san had envisioned?

L: oreki-san?
Houtaru: no, i'll do it
Houtaru: since i didn't ask her, i'll just have to speculate
Houtaru: if kaitou didn't die, then there would be no sealed room
L: even without the role of the cameraman?
Houtaru: you sure can be mean, you know? first, the killer is kounosu, she came in via the window
L: eh? but isn't the window?
Houtaru: there're two control room windows, either one's fine
Houtaru: using a rope, kounosu climbed into one of the control room windows
Houtaru: she then stabbed kaitou
Houtaru: though it was not enough to kill him
Houtaru: she then used the rope to return to the second floor
Houtaru: she then walked down the stairs to the lobby as though nothing happened
Houtaru: that's it
Houtaru: must be quite bitter for haba
L: what about the seventh actor hongou-san was looking for?
Houtaru: oh that? she wrote that requirement in before she completed the script
Houtaru: though i only realized afterwards, but there were 7 people in the movie
L: eh? no, there should be 6
Houtaru: it's not limited to the actors
Houtaru: there's also the narrator, remember? the one introducing the characters

Houtaru: even in the credit roll, his name was listed alongside theirs
L: oh, now i see!
L: but i don't understand, the room where kaitou collapsed
L: why is the door locked?
Houtaru: kaitou must have locked it himself from the inside
L: but why?
Houtaru: to run away from the killer, which is pretty common
Houtaru: but it's probably not the case here
L: i think i know
Houtaru: really? that's rare
L: since i think i understand a bit of what hongou-san is thinking

L: after getting stabbed by kounosu-san
L: kaitou said to her
L: why did she stab him
L: by any chance, maybe she wasn't aiming to kill him
L: so kaitou-san decided to cover for kounosu-san
L: as kounosu-san returned to the 2nd floor, he returned to the right stage

L: huh? but how does that explain the wounds?
Houtaru: i was thinking the same thing
Houtaru: that could be easily explained. maybe he got hit by the splattered glass
L: that's some strange glass

Houtaru: i meant "shattered". stop correcting my spelling, are you ibara or what?
Houtaru: maybe he was injuring himself so he could use that as an excuse
Houtaru: why did kounosu stab kaitou? and why did he forgive her?
Houtaru: we may never know the answer unless we ask hongou
L: guess it can't be helped
L: even though i'm curious about it
L: to stab one's own classmate, and to run away from the classmate that stabbed you
L: how would hongou-san envision such scenes?
L: i'm very curious about it

Houtaru: by the way, there's something i'd like to ask
L: yes, what is it?
Houtaru: this might be my imagination, but
Houtaru: didn't you yourself realize one answer from all this?
L: eh?
L: but i didn't solve anything
L: why do you say that?
Houtaru: the three from class 2-F plus me
Houtaru: you were convinced by none of our deductions
Houtaru: this is so unlike you. does that have something to do with your resonance with hongou?
L: oh, i see
L: let's see, it's because i think hongou-san and i are alike
Houtaru: ?
L: oh, this is a bit embarrassing

L: so please don't laugh

L: truth is

L: i don't like stories where people die

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yonezawa Honobu. As I'm not capable of greeting everyone while doing 32 tasks at the same time, I'll keep things short.

Compared to the previous volume "Hyouka", in some ways this volume was more relevant to the mystery genre. Parts of this story are based on actual events that I have personally experienced, though the characters are entirely fictional. Just saying this in case any of the staff involved back then end up buying this book.

To lovers of mystery, I'm sure you've realized, this story is written as a tribute to Anthony Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*. Agatha Christie does not come into this story, though I did contemplate incorporating some elements of her work at one time. The movie-like feel of the case is based on Abiko Takemaru's *Tantei Eiga* (Detective Movie). Please do read it if you have the chance.

Now then, there are no particular meanings for the chapter titles in this volume, though the title for chapter 5 is in a slightly different style from the rest. Yet I could not think of any title that could instill a feeling of surprise for that chapter. By the way, I think I'll tell you guys about the sushi incident next time.

Until then, thanks for reading.

Yonezawa Honobu